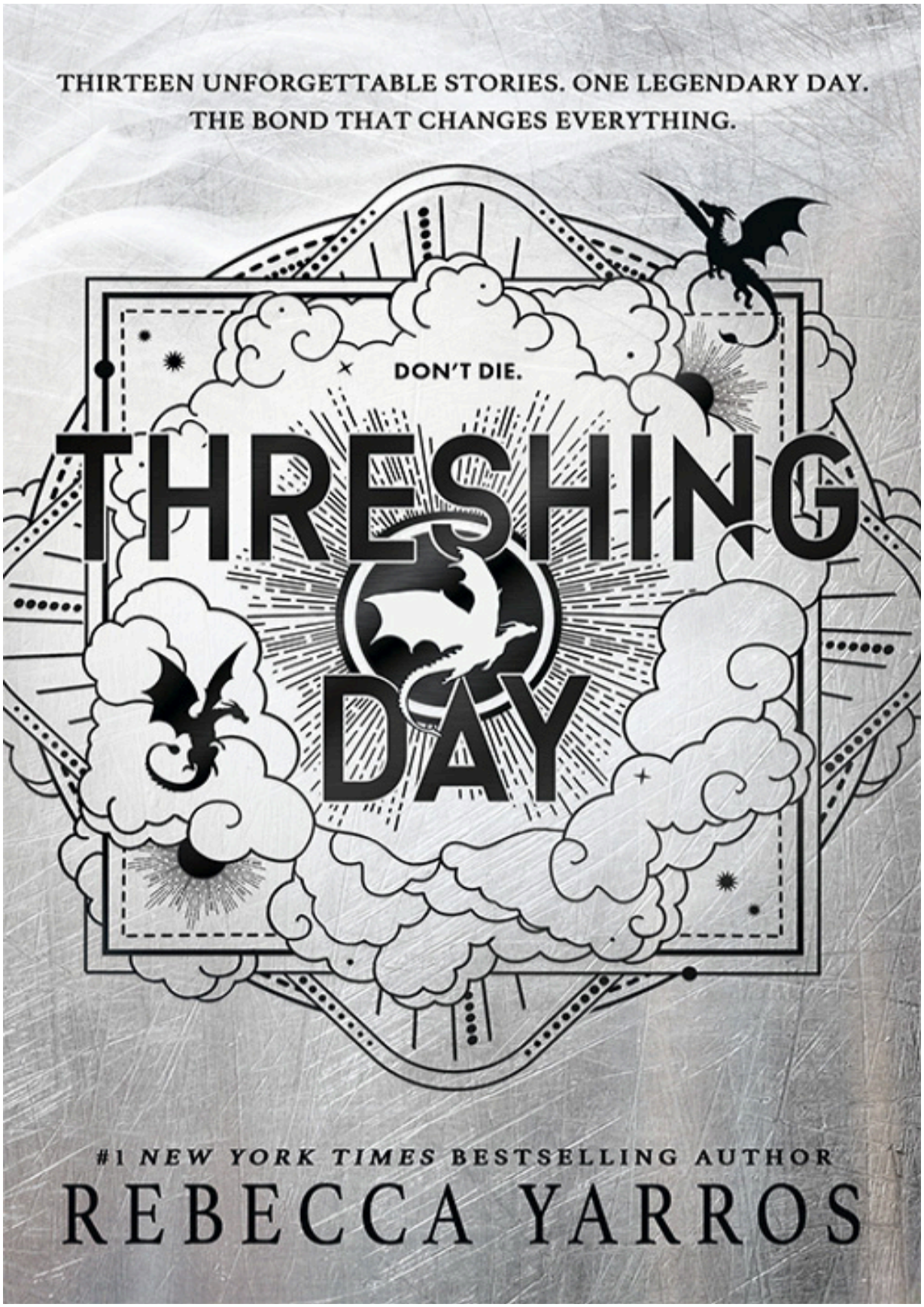
THIRTEEN UNFORGETTABLE STORIES. ONE LEGENDARY DAY.
THE BOND THAT CHANGES EVERYTHING.



#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

REBECCA YARROS


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DON'T DIE.
THRESHING DAY
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1. Cover

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THE EMPYREAN SERIES

Fourth Wing
Iron Flame
Onyx Storm
Threshing Day

MORE FROM REBECCA YARROS

The Things We Leave Unfinished
Great and Precious Things
The Last Letter

To everyone who has ever wanted to linger at Basgiath for just another page or two.

See you on the flight field.



Threshing Day is a nonstop-thrilling adventure fantasy set in the brutal and competitive world of a military college for dragon riders, which includes stories that contain spoilers for the titles Fourth Wing and Iron Flame, as well as elements regarding intense violence, perilous situations, brutal injuries, blood, death, burning, graphic language, and suicidal thoughts. Readers who may be sensitive to these elements, please take note, and prepare to enter the Threshing Valley…





The following text has been faithfully transcribed from Navarrian into the modern language by Colonel Valin Kaori and Lieutenant Ellery Mynna, professors of Dragonkind at Basgiath War College. All events are true, and names have been preserved to honor the courage of those fallen. May their souls be commended to Malek.

Trial by Fire: Threshing Advice for Dragonkind Professors

by Colonel Thadeus Palme

Come the first of October, no matter the weather, day of the week, or physical condition of the cadets, so long as they have reached the age of twenty, the first-years of Basgiath War College's Riders Quadrant walk into the forest in hopes of being chosen as a bonded rider by a dragon of the Empyrean. We call this monumental event *Threshing*. We quadrant professors must encourage the aim for success but also brace our cadets for the unpalatable realization that many will not survive this endeavor.

Threshing is a test for which there is no equal to be found on the Continent, but you are tasked with readying your students. Do not take your duty to adequately prepare your cadets for the selection process lightly; your instructions are as crucial as any weapon they could wield.

While every assignment in the Riders Quadrant holds its share of difficulty, we professors of Dragonkind, those the Empyrean call the dragon-watchers, carry a unique burden when it comes to first-year cadets. At all times, our loyalty remains with the Empyrean, but we must also maintain a vested interest in the success of our first-years for this essential partnership of riders and dragons to continue. I cannot overstate the enormity of our responsibility. Although boasting a projection signet—the ability to conjure images from memory—qualifies us to hold this vital position in the quadrant, only

those with a true passion to study the Empyrean while protecting the riders who serve it should accept the assignment.

It is with that in mind that I offer the following advice:

Always remember that the relationship between rider and dragon is symbiotic. Without dragons, humankind has no access to magic with which to weave the wards that protect Navarre. Without riders, the dragons have no wards to safeguard their hatching grounds. While this arrangement benefits both species, never forget that dragons find humans rather…expendable.

Trust other professors to excel in their areas of expertise as you would like to be trusted in yours. Do not meddle in the affairs of Battle Brief, history, physics, or other academics. If you seek the counsel of another professor regarding a first-year, I recommend making the acquaintance of the combat master. Between the physical sparring of challenges and the deadly obstacle course of the Gauntlet prior to Presentation, they are the only other professor who truly understands the weight of sending first-years to their possible deaths.

It is your duty within the first two months of classes to project an accurate depiction of every dragon willing to bond that year so the cadets can study before Threshing. You will have two reference points for this knowledge during your apprenticeship year under the retiring professor. The first is *The Compendium of Dragonkind*—our only visual reference guide to the active dragons of the Empyrean—which you will be responsible for updating during your tenure. Be warned: I have found that no artist has flawlessly depicted every distinguishing mark of a dragon, which makes telling descendants apart woefully difficult. The second reference point are the dragons themselves, whom you may have had the privilege of observing during past flight maneuvers with their previous riders, as well as the night of Threshing. When in doubt, it is prudent to ask a cadet for the name of their dragon, as speaking to any dragon to whom you are not bonded will end your tenure early due to death by fire. Never, under any circumstances, enter the hatching grounds of the Vale.

Previous professors of Dragonkind have encouraged rote

memorization via identification cards for cadets prior to Presentation, but in my experience, Presentation is more about dragons seeing and evaluating cadets in anticipation of Threshing than it is about cadets recognizing dragons. In fact, any cadet caught examining a dragon during Presentation is far more likely to be incinerated than bonded. The cards have proven invaluable for Threshing, though. If the cadets cannot memorize all dragons willing to bond, it is imperative they understand the differences between the temperaments of breeds and the safest methodology for surviving an encounter with each. An uneducated cadet is a dead one.

Instruct each cadet to listen deeply to their instincts when they enter the valley on Threshing Day. Those who a dragon has already taken interest in may feel a tugging sensation, which they should be encouraged to follow. In some cases, a chosen cadet may actually hear their dragon calling to them if they made a sufficient impression during Presentation. Cadets should also obey their instincts regarding retreating from dragons who aren't theirs to increase their lifespan.

Stress the importance of cadets entering the Threshing Valley on their own. Though squad loyalty can be comforting at this stage of education, statistics show that dragons prefer the courage of those willing to walk alone. They have substantiated this repeatedly by reducing most cadet groupings to ashes. It's unfortunate that those who do not survive cannot recount their experience, leaving us with only the ability to ponder the reasons behind their demise.

Prepare yourself to lose some of your favorite students or—better yet—don't get too attached. What we know about dragonkind and why they choose their riders is vastly overpowered by the magnitude of what we don't know. Those we're sure will emerge from the valley as bonded riders often perish among the trees—whether by dragon fire or cadet grievance—or are retrieved at nightfall and set back to repeat in hopes they will be selected the following year.

At all times, remember that while thousands of scribes record our history, we are the only riders charged with documenting what little we learn about dragonkind. Should you find yourself in the awkward position of taking sides between a cadet and a dragon, it is

imperative you prove your loyalty to the Empyrean or we will lose the privilege of observing it. It is on our words, our knowledge, our observations that the next generation of dragon riders will fly or expire.

In my retirement years, I have thought back fondly on my own Threshing. As my memory has become less reliable in the last decade, I find myself wishing I had ignored the customary secrecy that shrouds the event and recorded my own experience while it was still fresh in my mind. How can we learn to improve our chances at bonding if we don't record successful methods? If I could offer one last piece of advice, it would be to gather the tales of those who survive and are willing to tell it.

Threshing is the most dangerous day of any Basgiath cadet's life. I implore you to prepare your students to the best of your ability, but always remember that once they enter the Threshing Valley, only the opinions of the dragons matter.



624 AU
Marbh—Orange Daggertail
(Male) Descended from the Fhaicorain Line
Estimated Age: 76
Recorded Riders: 3

—The Compendium of Dragonkind,

last updated by Colonel Valin Kaori



Brennan

Today is the day I make my parents proud, the day I become a rider like my mother and her parents before me.

Or I could die and become the greatest disappointment in the Sorrengail line.

Damn, I really hope not.

Somehow, dying is preferable to Mom feeling like she needs to change my last name on my headstone because I didn't live up to it. Her familial line is so legendary among riders that Dad took her last name when they married, even though his was equally powerful among scribes.

"You sure you don't want to come with us?" Flynn Ennis asks as first-years scatter into Threshing Valley. The muscular brunet clutches the pommel of his short sword as if the weapon has a chance of protecting him from a dragon.

Unlike Ennis, I grew up close enough to Aimsir—Mom's dragon—to know that if a dragon wants to kill you, you're already dead. They couldn't care less about any weapon smaller than a crossbolt, and raising a sword will just piss them off.

"I'm sure." I give him a curt nod and a quick half smile to assuage the fear shining in his eyes. We spent a night together a few weeks ago, but I can't let anything I feel for him sway me from my years of preparation for this moment. Especially when he's making a stupid choice. "See you on the flight field, Ennis."

"See you on the flight field, Sorrengail," he replies, a barely noticeable tremble to his mouth. He turns back to a handful of my squadmates, and the group takes off together into the forest of enormous trees.

Gods, they're foolish.

I watch as they disappear, and my heart clenches. It's likely the last time I'll see some—if not all—of them. They're making a mistake, choosing the perceived safety of numbers and ignoring Professor Kaori's advice to conquer this challenge on our own, but nothing I've said in the past few days has swayed them. Trying to convince them now would only be an exercise in futility, and today is not the day to expend needless energy or waste time.

The only decisions I can impact are my own. I need to find the highest, most central tree in the valley, then keep watch as dragons move below until I feel the one who's meant for me. It's a simple and, hopefully, effective plan. I should be landing on the flight field in the next hour.

A shape moves in my peripheral vision, and my stomach dips as I pivot toward the threat, my head whipping to the right as a figure in the cream uniform of the scribes steps out from behind a wide tree trunk a dozen feet away.

"Dragons loathe crowds. Good choice to handle this on your own," Dad says with a nod of approval, the dappled sunlight catching the gold threads of the major rank stitched onto the shoulder of his tunic as he walks my way, opening his arms.

"Dad?" There's barely time to pick my jaw up off the ground before he pulls me into a hug, his hand thumping my back. I grasp on to him, breathing in the soothing scent of parchment that clings to his uniform, and something rights deep within me, steadies me. Mom may be the rigid spine of our family, but Dad is the heart. "What are you doing here?"

"Here as in Basgiath?" He pulls back, gifting me with a wide grin my mother has always sworn we share. We also have the same reddish hue to our hair, though his is slowly turning silver in streaks and mine is given to curl, and identically straight noses. The older I get, the more I look like him, which doesn't bother me in the least. "Or here as in the valley?"

"Both." Very few scribes are authorized to enter the Riders Quadrant, but *none* are given permission to witness Threshing. "I thought you were on assignment somewhere classified." He's been gone since May, which isn't uncommon given that he's one of the scribe academics more dedicated to historical analysis than recording current events. He's known to disappear for months at a time, first to research, then to write, but he always brings the best gifts back with him.

"I returned in August." His brow knits. "I'm sorry I missed Conscription Day, but there was no way I was letting you walk into Threshing without seeing you."

My gaze darts to the forest around us, and I breathe a little easier when I can't spot any other riders. "I'm relieved you're here, but the rules are pretty merciless if you get caught—"

"If I obeyed the rules, my rank would be higher. Don't worry about me. I'll take my chances with the new commander of the

Riders Quadrant." His grin deepens. "That newly pinned colonel has a soft spot for me."

I snort. "'Soft' isn't a word I'd ever apply to Mom. At least not to her face." My expression falls, a freedom I haven't given myself since crossing the parapet in July, but I don't have to be on guard with my father. "She only blunts her edges for two people on the Continent, and if I fail today, that number falls to one."

"You're her favorite, but she's her own kind of soft when it comes to your sisters, whether or not the three of you realize it." Dad clasps my shoulder, his hazel eyes softening. "And you won't fail."

"I don't want to let her down," I admit in a whisper. "Either of you." There hasn't been a moment in my life where I haven't been acutely aware of my father's accomplishments or the respect my mother commands from every rider I've ever encountered. I don't mind the weight of their legacies, but I don't want to be defined by them, either, which is really fucking hard given that I chose to wear rider black. "Are you angry I didn't enter the Healer Quadrant after you spent so much time teaching me about herbs?"

Mom focused on teaching me tactics, as though she always knew I'd cross the parapet.

"Never. Listen to me." Dad leans in. "You could never disappoint me, Brennan." He shakes his head, his eyes searching mine. "Your integrity, compassion, and wit make you a man of exceptional character, the kind any parent would be proud of. Your mother will be thrilled to see you land on the flight field no matter what dragon is wise enough to claim you. Her only expectation is that you live, and I think you'll find that has far more to do with being your mother than being your commander. Our hearts couldn't take it if anything happened to you."

I nod, swallowing the knot of emotion trying its hardest to block my throat. "How are Mira and Violet?"

Mom doesn't give me any special treatment in the quadrant, which means I've been cut off from letters and news from the rest of my family just like the other first-years. Never thought I'd see a day where I'd miss my little sisters annoying the shit out of me every minute, but I do. Constantly. I miss Mira's footsteps trailing behind

me and the way Violet smiles when she learns something new.

"Headstrong and precariously curious. In that order." Another grin flashes across his face as he drops his hand. "Mira nearly thrashed Dain Aetos last week when Violet fell out of a tree the two of them had been climbing."

"She's a little overprotective." A smile curves my mouth, then quickly falters. "Was Violet hurt?" She's always been frailer than Mira or me, prone to joint dislocations and broken bones, but the strength of her mind is unparalleled.

A scream sounds from the south, and my head snaps toward the forest, but Dad barely glances. My heart rate skyrockets, and smoke rises above the trees a moment later, scenting the air with a warning of imminent danger. People are dying out there, and I'm about to chance the same fate.

"Violet's fine. Nothing that couldn't be mended," Dad assures me, jarring me from my thoughts.

"Good." Thank the gods for menders. The gift is rare, but the riders with the signet for putting broken things back together, like Nolon, are a blessing to my sister. We need more of them.

A tree ignites in the distance, and my mouth goes dry.

"So what color are you hoping for?" Dad asks casually.

"I would have loved a black dragon, but none are willing to bond this year. I'm leaning toward green, given their more reliable, reasonable nature. It's probably easier to strategize with a dragon you can depend on. Brown would be great, too." I rub my thumb along my chin. "Anything but an orange."

"Never know. A little unpredictability might be good for you. Balance you out and all that." A smile plays across his face.

"Zihnal, *no*." I blanch and send a plea to the god of luck. "Fire and impulsivity shouldn't mix."

"Just remember that Zihnal doesn't favor just those who need luck but those who accept his gifts without hesitation." Dad rotates a black bead on the bracelet he wears on his left wrist, then pulls it off and hands it to me. "A dragon is surely the greatest gift a god can give, but I want you to have this."

"You've worn this since…forever." I slip the bracelet over my

hand. It's still warm from his body heat.

"And now it's yours. I'll feel better knowing you have a piece of me with you."

"Thank you." I twist the bracelet like I've seen him do thousands of times.

Another cadet shrieks to the south, deeper within the forest, and we both turn in that direction.

I swallow. Hard. "I have to go."

"I love you, Brennan." He pulls me into another hug, and I hold tight. "The next time I see you, you'll be a rider," he says, his tone calm as always. There's no desperation in his embrace, no fear that this will be the last time we see each other tightening his grip.

"I will," I promise. It's the certainty in his voice, the reassurance that I'll live through this day, that allows me to let go of him. Dad's never been wrong about anything, and I'm not going to prove him fallible today. "I love you, too."

"Don't stress, Brennan. Enjoy today. Dragons love Sorrengails." He walks away, disappearing into the trees with an ease that makes me wonder how many times he's faded into other backgrounds of perilous situations in the name of his research.

I turn toward the center of the forest, steady my breathing and my racing heart, then roll my shoulders.

Let's go.

Autumn leaves crunch under my feet as I move among the trees, listening for that little voice Kaori mentioned, waiting for my instincts to direct me. Overhead, brown fills the air as a dragon launches skyward. Guess that one isn't mine.

"I'm telling you, I saw a blue this way!" someone shouts.

"No blues are on Kaori's list," someone else argues.

It's on the tip of my tongue to warn them to split up when fire erupts through the trees to my left. I leap behind the trunk of a giant pine, my heart thundering as the voices fall silent. A Red Scorpiontail swishes into view, and I hold my breath, instinctively knowing that one is *not* mine.

I wait until the dragon clears the nearby space, then glance up at the sprawling branches of the tree I've taken shelter under. Now this

is a tree Violet would love to climb.

And it will give me the best vantage point.

Branch by branch, I scale the tree as quietly as possible, careful not to catch the sword I keep sheathed at my side on any of the rough bark. A dragon roars in the distance, followed by a scream, but I climb with single-minded focus. If I give in to the fear knocking at my heart with all the subtlety of a battering ram, the dragons will be able to smell it.

Dragons don't bond cowards.

The branches above me turn sparse and gangly with new growth, but none of them look capable of holding my weight, so I plant my feet right where they are, grasp the thinner branch above with both hands, and peer across the forest.

A kaleidoscope of colors fills my vision. The tops of the trees are a myriad of fall tones, the leaves providing camouflage for every color of dragon besides the blues and blacks that have abstained from this year's Threshing. Branches sway at various locations in the forest, no doubt propelled by the dragons that stalk beneath the canopy. There are three—make that four—plumes of smoke and one concerning fire to the east that surely deserves the attention of a water wielder. A Green Daggertail splits the air to the west, a rider clinging to her seat as the dragon beats its wings for altitude.

Mine is out there somewhere.

I close my eyes and listen to my pounding heart, hoping it will tug me in the direction of the dragon I'm meant to bond, but there's nothing. No tug. No pull. Not even a whisper of a twitch. Just a hot breeze against my face.

My brilliant plan might not be so brilliant after all. Would have been nice if Mom had given me some guidance or warned me about…anything. Parapet. Gauntlet. Presentation. The futility of climbing trees. I should write all this shit down so Mira doesn't have to figure it out on her own.

The heat suddenly intensifies, and my eyes pop open.

My heart lurches into my throat.

A scaly, burnt-orange snout hovers six feet from my face, huffing steam through enormous nostrils half as tall as I am. The cloud of

heated air hits my face a second before the dragon tilts its head, pinning me in place with inquisitive golden eyes. Its horns sweep back from its face, but I can't see their tips—or the rest of its body—with its head wedged in the branches of a tree.

I'm supposed to look away, to lower my eyes in supplication, to retreat without intruding on the dragon's field of vision, but I can't. My feet may as well be glued to the branch beneath me. For the first time in my life, I do the opposite of what I'm supposed to and *stare.*

"Only birds belong in the tops of trees." A raspy, masculine voice fills my head. *"Are you a bird, Sorrengail?"*

"What the fuck?" I blurt, and my hands jolt, letting go of the branch. My feet slip, my stomach abandons me, and gravity claims her prize as I fall right off the damned branch.

I smack into the limb below and scramble for a grip, hooking my arms over the steam-slicked place my boots had previously occupied and scraping the bare skin of my forearm. My feet kick beneath me, searching for a foothold, as the dragon pushes his head through the leaves, beating his wings slowly to maintain a hover.

"Precisely why humans should not climb trees."

"I don't usually fall out of them!" I shout back illogically as my feet finally find a lower branch. "And you aren't supposed to talk to humans who aren't yours."

"You're not supposed to look a dragon in the eye, yet here we are." He tilts his head as if examining me. *"Shall we play a game, eldest Sorrengail?"*

"No," I answer instantly, but I still can't seem to tear my eyes away from him even as my pride prickles. "And it's Brennan." Where is the predictable green I'm meant for? Or the subtly sly brown I've imagined?

"You have yet to earn a first name while your last overpowers it. Why would you seek a dragon as boring as you are?" he questions.

Holy shit, did he just nail every problem in my fucking life. Wait… boring?

"I'm *not* boring," I argue, lowering my hand from the branch above and cursing at the bloody scrape that runs the length of my forearm. "I'm loyal, and smart, and the best tactician of my year—"

"And boring." His nostrils flare in a deep inhale before huffing another breath of steam. *"You need not tell me all the things I already know about you to prove that point. Are you so burdened by your mother's shadow that you desire the same breed that bonded her?"*

My mouth opens and shuts like a fucking fish.

"Do you not yearn for a challenge? For someone who challenges you? Or is my instinct misguided? Have I found a docile robin in the place of the sharp-minded hawk I sought?" The orange narrows his eyes, continuing to hover in place.

Instinct? Hold on. Is this orange choosing *me*?

"If you have to ask, perhaps you should rethink your prior claim on intelligence."

But oranges are erratic, finicky, and—worst of all—unpredictable.

"Thank you, Sorrengail," he responds.

I ignore the prick to my pride and snort a laugh, which is undoubtedly an inappropriate response to Threshing. *A dragon is surely the greatest gift a god can give.* That's what Dad said. If this is the dragon I'm meant to dedicate my life to, who am I to deny such a monumental gift? And how ironic that the best piece of advice I've been given when it comes to Threshing came from my scribe father? I take a fortifying breath and then nod, wiping all expectations of how I thought this day would go from my mind. "I'll play your game."

"What if I've changed my mind about you already?" He bares sharp, pointed teeth.

My pulse stutters, but I hold my ground. "You haven't, or you would have flown off or torched me by now."

"Think of all the battles we will win with that bird-size brain of yours." There's an edge of excitement in his tone, making me question the insult. *"If you can find your seat without touching the ground, I'll accept you as mine."*

"And if I can't?" I ask, already mentally calculating the distance from the end of this branch to the nostrils he keeps flaring.

"I do not want a rider who cannot adapt to my unpredictable *nature. Either you'll fall to your death in the attempt or I'll see if*

your curly red feathers burn."

"So less like a game and more like an ultimatum?" I question, bouncing lightly on the branch to test the movement where it thins out about three feet from his nose.

"Everything is a game if you're smart enough to see the board."

Truer words have never been spoken.

"Deal." I grin. Yeah. This guy is mine. Waiting for him to agree would be foolish—he'd probably retreat just for the fun of watching me fall—so I take off at a run, my feet flying across the branch. I race down the limb, my gaze on the leafy end for the first sign it's going to dip under my weight.

The second the branch wavers, I leap.

Time slows to heartbeats for the brief seconds I'm airborne and the orange beats his wings, preparing to push back. These are either the first moments of the rest of my life or the last of my existence. My arms swing through the air as if I can claw my way across the distance, and my feet kick as momentum hurtles me toward the dragon.

This is definitely not the way Kaori taught us to mount.

I slam into the space between his nostrils, air gushing from my lungs on impact, and I grasp the first handholds I can find, which happen to be the edge of one scale and the ridge of one nostril.

"Little birdie can fly," he taunts, and sure enough, we're sailing through the air, his head already moving away from the branch.

My fingers dig into the crevices between scales, and every muscle in my upper body strains as I haul myself upward, unwilling to stick my feet anywhere near those teeth. The ground rushes by, or maybe it's the canopy. Either way, I'm not losing focus long enough to look as I crawl up this dragon's face in the most unorthodox technique known—and unknown—to mankind.

The angle shifts, and suddenly we're plummeting, making it even harder to haul myself up between his eyes. "Seriously?" I shout, keeping my attention on the scale beyond the one I have a hold on. "Because this wasn't hard enough already?"

"If you want easy, you should have joined the infantry," he quips.

Got it. The only thing I can expect when it comes to this dragon

is he'll do whatever I'm *not* prepared for.

"*You're learning.*" He pulls up out of the dive as branches skim the side of his face and I reach the top of his head. The abrupt change in direction sends me careening between his horns to slide down his neck. It's all I can do to throw my weight side to side, narrowly missing the sharp neck spikes that form no visible pattern down the length to his shoulders.

By Dunne, he must be in a near-vertical climb, because the treetops of the valley lie beyond the deadly tips of his razor-sharp daggertail, and if I don't stop this momentum, I'll slide straight off to my death. There's no surviving a fall from this altitude, just corpse recovery. Adrenaline floods my system as I slam my hands down, accepting whatever damage his scales might do in the name of gaining a second of traction. Pain ripples up my arms, but I catch the edge of a ridge of scales just before his shoulders and dig the heels of my boots into the next set long enough to roll to my stomach.

Wind hits me head-on as the dragon continues to climb toward the midday sun, and I ease my body down one scale at a time, making sure to wedge my toes between scales as I climb toward his seat. Gravity doesn't give a shit that I'm Lilith and Asher Sorrengail's son. It's only on my own merit that I'll make this happen.

My feet slide across his pommel scales, then slip over the smooth dip of his seat. There's no foothold here, no way to ease myself into position. Leaping from the tree was one thing, but I'll need Zihnal's own luck to pull this off. My heart pounds so hard I feel it in my ears, my vision pulsing in time with the beats as I reach for the next ridge of scales, holding on to him with only my hands.

The second I grasp his pommel scales, I let out a shout of victory. "I win!" I yell into the wind as it rips the moisture from my eyes.

"*There is no longer an* I*,*" he corrects me as he levels out and my ass settles into the seat. "*There is only* us*.*"

I bend my knees, then lock the toes of my boots between his scales just like Kaori taught us, securing my seat.

Then the damned dragon dives into a spiral.

"Marbh," he tells me. *"Not* damned dragon*. Though I will answer to Glorious One, Brilliant One, or Zihnal's Chosen should you prefer."*

"I'll stick with Marbh!" I shout. The ground spins like a pinwheel, and I shove back against the pommel to maintain my seat, defying both centrifugal motion and gravity to prove myself worthy.

"Your worth is no longer in question," Marbh lectures. *"Now it's only the strength of your stomach we need to test."*

Up. Down. Up. Down. Up. Down.

He climbs, then dives until my face is green and I regret every single choice I made at breakfast, but I hold my seat. I earn my black leathers. When I look up, the flight field is in the distance, the floor of the box canyon speckled with every color of dragon that has gathered to watch and those who have already landed with their cadets. I can only hope that my squadmates—that Ennis—can be counted among those riders.

"There is only us," Marbh tells me again as we fly for home. *"Marbh and Brennan."*

I'm no longer just a Sorrengail.

I am Marbh's rider.



627 AU
Teine—Green Clubtail
(Male) Descended from the Cruaidhuaine Line
Estimated Age: 41
Recorded Riders: 0

—The Compendium of Dragonkind,
last updated by Colonel Valin Kaori



Mira

I've been training for this day for years. It's finally here, but as Zihnal would have it, the Green Clubtail I spotted at Presentation is nowhere to be found.

Teine. That's what the Threshing cards show as his name. I

think. It's not like staring during Presentation is a good idea, but I took one look at him and simply *knew*.

The forest is a sea of color as I drag my hand across my sweaty forehead, shoving back the strands of my short brown hair and staring out from the highest branch of the tallest tree I could find. Wandering for the last hour has gotten me nowhere, and since Brennan bonded in a tree, I figured it couldn't hurt to climb one. The visibility would be incredible if not for the fact that the dragons fit *under* the smaller trees, their branches blocking the view, but I've caught sight of a few browns, a couple of oranges, and even glimpsed the one blue willing to bond this year, but not a single green.

"Where are you?" I mutter into the wind, refusing to give in to the frustration festering in my stomach.

Brennan made this part sound simple in the book he left me, but my perfect older brother and I have different definitions of "easy." If I didn't love him so much, the effortless grace with which he excels at everything would annoy the shit out of me. My heart clenches and my fingers flex on the coarse bark of the tree as I glance southward, toward Tyrrendor and the front lines of that province's rebellion.

Dunne, watch over my brother.

There's no price I wouldn't pay to protect his back, but I have to trust that the goddess of war has him covered.

I hope Fen Riorson burns for attempting to fracture our kingdom. The duke's frustration over mining mandates for Talladium—one of the minerals we need to power our wards—is understandable, but that resource is only found in Tyrrendor. I even sympathize with his anger over his province's disproportionate conscription rates. But to risk the safety of all Navarrian citizens by seceding is unforgivable. Without the province of Tyrrendor, our enemies in Poromiel will overrun our borders and we'll lose the war we've been fighting for centuries. Countless civilians will die if we don't quell the rebellion.

Don't think about it. That's pretty much my mantra when it comes to the overwhelming fear that claws at my throat when I remember that Brennan is at the front, even though he only graduated a few months ago. He should be at a safer mid-guard

post, but menders—especially ones as powerful as Brennan—are rare. Our wounded need all the help they can get. At least he's under Mom's command in Luceras. Violet and I might be dispensable to her, but she'd move the world to protect Brennan. No doubt Dad is keeping Violet safe with the scribes at the outpost, which would explain why I didn't get a pre-Threshing visit like Brennan did.

It definitely puts my place in the family into perspective.

"See anything?" Cowan Zana calls up from the base of the tree, jarring me from my thoughts.

I cringe and glance toward the treetops. His voice is too loud for comfort.

"Not since the blue," I answer back to my favorite squadmate in a much lower, dragon-friendly tone. We're already risking their anger by staying together for the past hour, but I wasn't going to force Cowan out on his own when he'd asked me to stay by his side. We've already lost four first-years out of our squad, and I refuse to let Cowan be the fifth.

"No reds?" he asks, quieter this time.

"I promise I'll tell you." I hold on to the trunk with one hand and unbutton my collar with the other. October is usually pretty mild at Basgiath, but today is hot enough to make me wonder if Mom might be visiting from her post in Luceras and using her weather-wielding signet to fuck with me. It wouldn't be the first time she's made things harder to test me, as if wearing her last name on my uniform wasn't a heavy enough challenge to carry.

Then again, at least her three years in command of the Riders Quadrant were during Brennan's time and not mine. Things could always be worse. She could be stationed here, breathing down my neck with the constant reminder that Sorrengails always rise to the rank of wingleader.

A scream punctures the quiet of the forest to the north, and I turn my head just in time to see a stream of fire engulfing a small clearing in that general direction. Yep. Things could definitely be worse.

A tugging sensation in my chest pulls my attention a hundred yards to the west, where one tree sways after another, as if a

dragon comes this way.

"Is that you?" I whisper, hope sparking in my chest.

Move, my instincts scream, and hair rises on the back of my arm.

I obey the feeling immediately, scurrying down the tree and slipping more than once when my short sword catches on the branches.

Violet would laugh if she could see me now, fumbling at one of the things she excels at. She'd kick my ass at academics, too, but the physicality of the Riders Quadrant would end her sweet smile in five seconds. Thank gods my little sister is studying to be a scribe like Dad and won't ever know the fear that's taken up residence in my veins since the moment I stepped onto the parapet.

"There's something coming." I jump the last six feet and land on the leaf-covered ground near where Cowan waits, bending my knees to absorb the impact, then brush my hands off on my pants.

"A red?" he asks, hope shining in his dark-brown eyes.

"I couldn't see the scale color." Definitely not saying I think it's Teine, because there are few things I hate more than being wrong.

"Ugh." He throws back his head and groans, speckled sunlight catching the dots of sweat on the warm brown skin of his cheeks.

"You're welcome to climb yourself, if you think you can do a better job," I offer, gesturing toward the trunk as I scour the tree line, hoping for a glimpse of whatever has my instincts on alert.

"I can't help my height." He jumps, reaching for the closest limb, but comes up short, his fingertips just brushing the bottom of the branch before he lands. "Trust me, if I could spontaneously sprout another couple of inches and catch up to you, I would." He flashes a quick grin. "Then maybe *I'd* be the best in our year. Or at least I'd give you some competition."

"I'm not the—"

Branches break nearby, and we both swing our heads to the left.

Please be Teine.

A ruby-red snout appears through the trees, low to the ground in combat position as the scorpiontail passes by about forty feet away, paying us no heed. I drop my gaze to the forest floor just in case the red looks our way, and every muscle in my body locks.

Fear drums on my heart with an increasing tempo and skitters down my spine. It is one thing to see the enormous dragons with their rippling scales, intimidating spikes, and fatal talons, even as close as they were after Parapet and Presentation. It's quite another to have one stalk by and know today is the day it either bonds you or kills you. Given that the only connection I've felt has been to Teine, this red is likely to incinerate me if I give the slightest offense.

Cowan, on the other hand…

"There's your red," I whisper, glancing his way.

"Yeah it is." He nods, and his shoulders rise and fall rapidly as he stares directly at the Red Scorpiontail. "Gods, this is really it."

"Be careful—"

"I've got this," he promises with a quick burst of a smile. "Even you can't protect me from fate." His bow bounces against his spine as he takes off into the woods, chasing after the dragon. "Good luck, Sorrengail!"

"See you on the flight field."

Leaves rustle and I turn westward, gazing toward the branches swaying in the distance. That same arm-prickling sensation comes back twice as strong as the movement in the canopy draws closer.

Move.

My heart races, but I honor the intuition again, walking forward into the wide space between trees and stepping into full sunlight. The move exposes my back, and I can't help but wonder if this dragon wants to see if I'll make myself vulnerable for its favor.

I do, instantly questioning if the decision will put me on tomorrow's death roll.

The treetops directly in front of me part, and my stomach lurches into my throat as the giant green appears twenty feet away, his wings folded in to fit through the forest.

It's him. Teine.

The dragon lowers his massive head, swiveling it side to side like a hunter-green snake. A snake with legs. And claws. And teeth. Saliva drips from his fangs as he bares said teeth and stalks forward.

It takes every ounce of self-discipline I have not to retreat.

Oh shit. Oh shit. Oh shit. Is this happening? Or am I about to die

because my instincts aren't as stellar as I think they are and this isn't my dragon? Kind of wish I had General Melgren's signet—the ability to see the outcome of any battle—but I'm going to have to go on instinct here.

His low rumble rattles my sword in its scabbard, and I remind myself to breathe. Dying of hypoxia would be ridiculously embarrassing given all the other respectable forms of demise going around out here today.

Wait. I'm not supposed to look him in the eyes, right?

No. That's reds. No…greens, too. I drop my gaze to his claws. Shit. It's something about supplication and waiting for approval.

Godsdamn it. Violet would know the answer. No amount of stress would ever diminish the billions of facts that girl keeps in her head. She has an endearingly weird habit of spouting off information to keep herself calm in situations where she'd be better off backing down for her own safety.

Backing down. I inhale sharply. That's it.

Never back down from a green. That's what Kaori lectured.

I have to stand my ground, no matter what. It sounded infinitely easier while sitting in a classroom, pondering the more *reasonable* nature of greens. Nothing about the sharp teeth of the creature in front of me feels reasonable because he's still a fucking *dragon.* Maybe he considers it reasonable to snack on me for calories instead of simply setting me on fire and wandering away. What exactly defines "reasonable" anyway?

My hands curl into fists at my sides to keep from flinching as the green huffs a sulfur-scented breath, surrounding me with steam. At least it isn't fire. That has to be a good sign. Was Brennan this scared when he found Marbh? Did Mom's knees tremble when Aimsir appeared?

I highly doubt it.

Teine opens his jaws wider than I am tall, and my breath stutters. Then he lets out an ear-piercing roar that blows back my hair and shakes my very bones.

Don't move. Don't you dare fucking move. My nails dig into my palms, but I keep my feet planted, even as my heart tries its best to

beat out of my chest like it can escape.

His head lunges forward and teeth snap shut a few feet away, as if I need the reminder that he could decapitate me for fun, but I hold my ground.

He withdraws his head just far enough to tilt it downward. Golden eyes narrow on me in flagrant assessment. I raise my gaze to his, which is either the best or worst decision I could make. Guess time will tell. If he's going to kill me, then at least I'll see it coming.

"You hide your fear well." His voice is deep, commanding, and my heart stutters.

Oh gods. Dragons only speak to the riders they choose.

"If that were true, you wouldn't know I'm afraid," I counter, letting my mouth overrun my common sense. Kaori would definitely mark me down a few points if he could see me directly disobeying the most fundamental rule that riders should never speak to dragons they aren't bonded to.

"Don't be absurd. I know everything about you, Mira Sorrengail." His body sways, and he swings his massive clubtail to the left. His tail collides with the trunk of a thick tree, and wood splinters, then cracks, the sound splitting the thick air.

Snap. The tree groans as it plummets through the foliage, stripping branches along the way as it crashes toward the ground. I spare a single glance to be sure the tree's trajectory is clear of my current position, but the rest of me keeps completely still. If my heart beats any faster, it's going to take flight long before I do.

"Everything except the point at which you fracture," Teine says a breath before the tree smashes into the ground, the nearest branch making impact close enough that I feel a breeze along my cheek.

"There is no such point." I fight to regulate my breathing. Dad would scoff at me if I praise Hedeon for granting me the wisdom not to move, so I send a quick prayer of thanks up to Zihnal that the tree didn't bury me where I stand.

"We shall see about that." Teine reaches forward with a claw, one of his talons scraping away the top layer of dead leaves inches from my boot without disturbing the soil beneath. The precision is far more frightening than his teeth. *"I have not bonded previously*

because I refuse to bear a rider who breaks under pressure."

He reaches forward with a single talon, then lowers it to the center of my left thigh. Leather gives way, and I cease breathing and hold his narrowed gaze as the first rush of pain floods my bloodstream. Fire charges up my leg, and I feel my skin split, but I refuse to look away from Teine's eyes.

This bond only works if we trust each other.

Guess dragons think trust begins with pain.

"I was raised in a crucible," I force out between my clenched teeth. "Pressure is my playground. I may not be a Sorrengail firstborn, but I'm the eldest daughter. There is no such thing as *breaking*."

"Ah yes, a legendary Sorrengail."

The pain quickly shifts into agony as his talon slices down my thigh. I grit my teeth to avoid crying out and somehow manage to stay on my feet even as my knees threaten to buckle.

"I'm curious. Your brother is your mother's son, and your sister is your father's daughter, so to whom do you belong?"

The words strike deeper than bone and hurt far more than the line he's cut into my thigh. He hasn't just found my one insecurity; he's held it up to the light and poked it to watch me bleed. He's right. Brennan is Mom's. Violet is Dad's. I am…no one's. But they are all mine, and that's enough.

"I belong to myself." I breathe into every form of pain he's inflicting on me. "And maybe to you, but only if you take your fingernail out of my leg. You don't scare me."

Teine's eyes flare for the faintest of seconds, and he lifts the talon, dangling it in front of my face. My blood drips from the sharp point, and my thigh begins to throb.

Fine. That amount of blood is a bit…scary.

"True, I am no one's favorite." I look beyond the talon to his eyes to keep from focusing on the crimson substance that used to be in my veins. "But it's only taught me to work harder at the things I can control."

"And what will you do with all the power I could give to you?" he asks as he sets his claw on the ground and peers closer at me. *"Will*

you mend the broken things like your brother? Raise the storms like your mother? Control fire like your grandmother? Wield the tides like your great-grandfather—"

"I'm more than familiar with my family's legacy. I don't need it recited." If he insists on continuing, we'll be here until nightfall, and the throbbing in my leg has escalated to a body-wide pounding that's making it increasingly difficult to remain on my feet. "I have no way of knowing what signet I will manifest, but I will use it in every way possible to protect those I love. To protect the ones *you* love. No amount of pain inflicted on me will ever change that."

Teine draws his head back slowly and blinks. *"I will accept you as my first rider, but should you fall on our way to the flight field, I will not mourn before choosing a second."*

"Harsh. I can respect that." My pulse gallops for an entirely different reason as fear is quickly overtaken by exhilaration. He's choosing me. Or at least allowing this interview to pass into the flight phase, about which I have no worries. "I suppose if you'll accept me as your first rider, then I'll accept you as my first dragon."

"Riders do not survive the deaths of their dragons." Teine stands to his full height and digs his claws into the ground, mixing my blood into the dirt.

"No sense of humor. Got it." I rise up on my toes to test the pain but don't bother looking down at my leg. I can still bear weight on it, so I'll handle whatever damage is there when we get to the flight field. Besides, if it were arterial, I'd be dead by now.

"As if I would be so careless as to mortally wound you?" Teine huffs in annoyance. *"I am the epitome of control, and I expect the same of you."*

"Excellent. Good to know I'm walking into another relationship founded on unrealistic expectations." I pull a deep breath into my lungs, then run for Teine, despite the pain encompassing the lower left half of my body. When it's time to jump, I launch off my right foot and make it up a good portion of his leg before I need to grab hold of his scales and hoist myself the rest of the way.

Once I reach his seat, I position myself as Kaori taught us, keeping my hands on the pommel scales and using my thighs to

hold tight in preparation for launch. Only then do I glance to the left, where I see a trail of blood on his green scales. He may have marked me, but I've done the same to him in my own way.

"Now let's see if you can hold on long enough to report my full name to your roll-keeper," he says as he crouches under me.

"You'll never shake me." A smile spreads across my face. "And I can promise you this, Teine. I may not be your last rider, but I'll be your favorite."

He snorts, but there's a surge of approval down the thin whisper of a bond forming on the edge of my mind as he springs forward and launches through the hole in the canopy that he created when felling the tree.

We fly, and the pain in my leg fades under an onslaught of adrenaline as we soar into the wind. Every beat of Teine's wings propels us faster, makes my smile wider. No wonder Mom pushed Brennan and me to be riders. Nothing on the ground could ever compare to this, the freedom, the speed, the exhilaration. This is worth every ounce of pain the quadrant puts us through.

My leg protests vehemently through a series of spirals, but I mold my body to Teine's back and hold my seat like any good Sorrengail.

By the time we land, I'm lightheaded from the thrill, the thinner air, and probably a substantial amount of blood loss, and I've never been happier.

I breathe a hefty sigh of relief when I spot Cowan standing proudly in front of his Red Scorpiontail, a bandage wrapped around his upper arm. We'll celebrate later, as soon as the whole world knows that Teine chose *me*.

Every step across the flight field is excruciating after I dismount, but I keep from the indignity of limping by sheer force of will. My gaze scours the riders who have gathered on the hillside and the dais in front of me as I walk toward the third-year keeping roll. Panchek is here, of course, and even the commanding general of all Navarre's forces—General Melgren—has taken the time to make an appearance, along with the generals of the eastern and western wings. There's no trace of my mother.

I swallow the bitter taste of disappointment and remind myself that there's a war going on and she's needed elsewhere. Honestly, I'd rather she be at the front with Brennan or at her station at the Torseney outpost, keeping Dad and Violet safe. But still, it would have been nice to see a shred of validation in her eyes.

"My validation is all you shall seek from now on," Teine lectures.

I roll my eyes, but there's a grin on my face as I give Teine's full name to the roll-keeper, officially becoming his chosen.

Tyrrendor had better watch itself. Two Sorrengail siblings now bear the title of *rider.*



631 AU
Sgaeyl—Blue Daggertail
(Female) Descended from the Gormfaileas Line
Estimated Age: 64
Recorded Riders: 3

OF NOTE: DO NOT APPROACH UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES.

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Xaden

First-years pour into the forest to the south of us as snow starts to fall, but I wait at the edge of the trees with the other marked ones

as the crowd rushes by with an exuberance I'll never understand.

Then again, those Navarrians probably don't have to worry about a dragon seeing their deepest, darkest secrets, their thoughts, their memories that wake them up in a cold sweat. They're all here because they volunteered. None of them has been thrown into the Riders Quadrant because their parents were the leaders of the apostasy—the Tyrrish term for our revolt. That honor belongs to the ten of us here with rebellion relics winding around our left arms—a mark the majority of the kingdom believes was *gifted* to us by General Melgren's dragon upon the execution of our parents three years ago.

We're the ones with something to hide, the ones whose parents led a just rebellion for the greater good, only to lose, the ones every other cadet in this hellscape of a college wants dead.

And as Fen Riorson's son, I have the job of seeing that we all get out of here alive.

Marked ones. Separatists. Traitors. Those words have been hurled at us for years, but we've gotten used to the insults. Victors dehumanizing the defeated is a cliché we've learned to live with.

We've secretly helped one another where we can, in academics, Gauntlet preparation, and on the mat, but there's not much I can do about the fire-breathing dragons waiting in that forest for us, and it's *killing* me. If any of us die, it will be my fault for putting us here in the first place.

"When are you thinking we should go?" Garrick asks quietly from my right. His lip has yet to heal from the last time Alic Baran ambushed him while sleeping.

I hate that fucking bully almost as much as I hate his fool of a father.

Soleil glances my way from the left, looking for the same answer.

"Not yet." I keep my tone low. "We're not giving them our backs if we can help it."

They both nod, then pass the message to the others on their respective sides.

"Ready to die, you fucking separatists?" Amber Mavis hisses in our direction, narrowing her blue eyes on us before jogging to catch

up with a handful of her squadmates. She's the last of the Navarrians to head into the valley.

Fuck her and her superiority complex.

My hands curl into fists at my sides, but I take a deep breath and swallow my temper. It's not anything we haven't heard before, and letting my anger reign will get me nowhere. Once we're in those trees, all bets are off—the cadets are just as likely to kill us as the dragons—but Kaori is still watching, and I'm smart enough not to break Codex in front of a professor. He clears his throat as if to remind us that he's still standing between us and the forest, like there was any possible chance we'd forget.

"Since speaking to more than three of you at a time is an opportunity I'm never given, thanks to Addendum Five to the Code of Conduct, I'm going to take advantage," Kaori says, and snowflakes settle on his black hair before melting.

It never snows this early at Basgiath, but today a cold front rolled in, early enough for us to get on our heavier winter uniforms and cloaks. I can't help but wonder if General Sorrengail is up there fucking with the weather just to make it harder on us. I wouldn't put it past her. She may have struck the deal with me that put us in the quadrant instead of on the executioner's block, but she's also the officer who hunted down our parents. As much as I'd love to sneak into the main campus and take the life of her youngest, just so she can touch the pain the hundred and seven of us live with every day, it would get the rest of the marked ones killed. For now, I'll have to be content with the knowledge that she still mourns her oldest.

"I know the quadrant hasn't been easy on the ten of you." Worry lines the space between Kaori's dark brows as he glances down the line of our group. He and Devera are the only professors who don't treat us like pariahs. Pretty sure the rest of them are hoping the dragons finish us off today just in case we turn out like our parents. "But I've seen what happens after Threshing, the way the power dynamic shifts when powerful dragons bond. I promise the others will stop attacking you once you have a dragon at your back."

None of us respond.

"Right." Kaori ruffles the snow from his hair. "Watch out for

Cruinn, Raighmur, and Tealach. They all had riders killed during the rebellion, and they'll be…"

"Happy to eat us?" Carrigan Wyckley offers from my left, where she stands with her identical twin. They're both in Amber Mavis's squad in Third Wing, and I have no doubt Amber will use today's lack of supervision to try to take them both out. Good thing the majority of us are excellent fighters, the twins included.

"Dragons eating people is really a misconception." Kaori tries to smile at us. "Yes, they'll absolutely ingest a person if necessary for caloric intake, but—"

"We understand what you're saying, Professor," Garrick interrupts before Kaori launches into a full-out lesson.

"Good." Kaori nods and claps his hands together. "Then I'll see you on the flight field. Remember to split up once you're in there. We have some second- and third-years observing who will hold you to the Code of Conduct." He walks off toward the hill, leaving the ten of us on the outskirts of the forest.

Nine sets of eyes land on me.

"Think he suspects?" Bryn asks, lifting her left hand, where the shimmering swirls of her tattoo-like relic peek out from her uniform above her wrist.

"Doubt it." My jaw works in frustration. Knowing everything that goes on around us is an impossibility, but not knowing who is privy to our secrets could get us killed. The relics on our arms do more than mark us as the children of traitors, but the longer we keep that information to ourselves, the better.

"Any last words of wisdom before we head in?" Soleil buttons her cloak under her neck.

"Keep a weapon drawn at all times." I reach over my shoulder and draw one of the two swords I keep sheathed at my back just like Garrick. Every person palms their weapon of choice. "Forget what Kaori said about going in alone and stick to pairs, like we talked about. Remember, we have just as many threats on two legs as we do four. Don't hesitate to defend yourselves, and give no mercy, for you will get none. We'll meet at the tree tonight."

Everyone nods, but there are more than a few downcast eyes,

and Howell's shoulders are slumped. Out of all of us here, he's the only one who isn't Tyrrish, but his father and his dragon fought on our side, which earned him a death sentence.

A cacophony of noise draws our attention to the sky, and a riot of dragons bursts through the clouds high above us. The sight is enough to make even my breath catch. Every breed but black is willing to bond this year, and they descend on the forest with the force of an earthquake as one hundred and sixty-three of them land in the trees.

Guess it's time.

"The dragons know what our parents did." Masen nervously pushes his glasses up his nose.

"Yeah, and you'll remember that some of the Empyrean sided *with* us," Garrick says, adjusting his grip on his sword. The guy has grown another couple of inches in the last year, making his usually dense frame a little gangly. "There are dragons here who know what's out there and will choose the same. We just have to find them before the others find us. This isn't hopeless."

"Feels like it." Cerella Wyckley leans a dark-brown cheek on her sister's shoulder.

"You will *all* live," I order, raising my voice, and their spines straighten. Excellent. They're as good as dead if they walk in there already defeated. "You will live for our parents, for our siblings, for one another. We are the first ten to enter this quadrant, but there are ninety-seven still to follow, and we will show them that we can not only survive this place but thrive in it." Bodhi will be here next year, and Liam the year after that. The thought of my cousin and foster brother enduring this turns my stomach. "We have a mission, and we will accomplish it. We will not be on tomorrow's death roll. I fucking forbid it. Do you understand?" I meet their gazes one by one, and slowly, they all nod, even Howell.

The pairs head off in their assigned directions.

The twins to the east.

Howell and Weylan cut a path between the twins and the center.

Keanan and Bryn hold hands as they go west.

Soleil and Masen disappear between the trees to the right.

Garrick and I head straight into the middle of the forest, and the snow fades as we step under the canopy of the enormous trees. My gaze sweeps left to right and then back again, scanning for threats.

An impish grin crosses Garrick's face the second the others are out of sight. "Ah, young love. Keanan and Bryn are still going strong, even after being fostered separately. Gives me hope."

"Loving anyone in this place is fucking stupid." I shake my head and watch the trees for movement. "It makes you vulnerable. Vulnerability is weakness. Dragons kill weak things."

"Ever the romantic." His grin deepens, reopening the cut on his lip as he scans the perimeter on the left.

"I'm a realist." I take watch on the right, looking over my shoulder to keep our backs clear, too.

"Someday, someone is going to come along who knocks you on your ass, Xaden." He laughs. "And I just hope I'm alive to see…" His face falls. "Shit. I almost forgot."

"That I have about eight months until I'm betrothed to someone I can't stand?" A rabbit catches my attention, but I quickly move on.

"Yeah. Fuck. I'm sorry." He rubs the back of his neck with his left hand, keeping his sword in his right. "But maybe one day you'll develop feelings for Cat—"

"Not going to happen. That's business. Not love." Every encounter I've ever had with the spoiled aristocrat has only reinforced my belief that we are going to be miserable. "But that contract gives us a fighting chance, and that's all that matters."

"Right." He blows out a long sigh, and guilt taps my shoulder.

He's been my best friend since I can remember, and the last thing I want is him feeling shitty about me fulfilling the agreement my father made, so I flip the subject to him. "Besides, not all of us fall in love with the first girl we see and then do nothing about it—"

"She was *not* the first girl I ever saw," he argues, switching his sword to his left hand so he can swing a finger in my direction. "And you don't get a say in who you fall for."

"We'll see how that goes for you next year when she gets here. You'll have to stop fucking around, you know." A smile tugs at my mouth as color flushes his cheeks.

"You're one to talk, considering you hauled yourself out of a third-year's room this morning." He scoffs. "Besides, that woman will *never* own up to wanting me, and therefore we will never happen. I will be free to fuck around for the rest of my life, while you, my sweet little honey bear, will not. One of us will be in a loveless marriage, and the other in love with no hope of marriage. Not sure who I pity more."

"We make quite the pair." I nod, noting that the snow has stopped.

"Misery loves company, and you and I will sail those melancholic waters like we do everything else—together." He locks his elbow around my neck. "We'll just have to make the best of this year, I suppose."

A shrill scream erupts in the distance, and his arm falls away as our steps slow.

"The good news is, there's one less person out there trying to kill us." I shrug.

"Praise Malek!" He falters. "Unless you think that was one of us."

I shake my head. "Too far away."

Sun cuts through the clouds as we take the western path around a redwood tree that's thicker than the turrets in Basgiath, and Garrick puts his hand to his chest.

"You all right?" My brow furrows.

"Something…" He looks off into the distance as we come around the tree, and I follow his line of sight toward what looks to be a clearing to the west. "Something in my chest…hurts. Like a hook is lodged between my ribs and is tug—" Garrick stops walking.

"Could be your dragon." I glance back at Garrick and stop dead in my tracks. My stomach clenches as I spot the bejeweled dagger held to my best friend's pale throat.

One of the only people in the world I can't get away with killing stands behind Garrick, just tall enough that his blond hair and royally green eyes peek out above Garrick's shoulder.

"You'd attack me from behind? That's low, even for you." Garrick arches his neck to get away from the blade, and I immediately lift my sword. "But at least I'm awake this time."

That asshole came after Garrick in his sleep last week, more than comfortable breaking the Codex, knowing no one would say shit because he's a prince of Navarre. I hadn't woken up until Garrick had been beaten pretty badly, and I'll be damned if he gets away with it again.

"Drop it, Alic," I order.

He smiles maniacally and tilts his head.

Fuck it. If it's just the three of us, I'll gut him and no one will be the wiser. King Tauri has three sons. He won't miss one, and it's not like Alic's first in line for the throne. That one went into the Infantry Quadrant like a good little firstborn aristocrat.

Like my father wanted me to do.

Except only two of us here have rebellion relics, which means if I provoke a fight, Melgren's signet will allow him to see the outcome. And then Garrick and I will be executed for killing this asshole, which would be detrimental to the goal of what we're doing at Basgiath.

"Your Royal *Highness*, Alic Tauri Baran. Where are your manners?" Alic clicks his tongue. "One move out of you, Riorson, and Tavis will bleed the ground red." He scrapes the dagger down Garrick's skin.

Gods*damn* it. The metallic tang of fear coats my tongue, but I keep my blade level and my eyes locked on the knife. The tip of my sword is only about two feet from doing damage, but he's using Garrick as a shield. No matter how fast I move, he can slit Garrick's throat before I get there.

"Look what we have here, boys," Alic calls out. "The son of the rebellion's leader and his aide."

Two of his little sycophants from Second Wing—Eian and Lorne—race out from behind the giant redwood, swords raised. They are only a couple of inches shorter than I am, and Lorne is built like a bull.

We're outnumbered, and I haven't quite solved the blade-at-Garrick's-neck issue, which Alic reminds me by pressing the dagger just hard enough to draw a single bead of blood.

"Lower your sword, Riorson," Alic orders in a snotty tone that holds only the authority he was born with.

"Don't do it—" Garrick starts, and Alic draws another bead of blood.

Instead of lowering my sword, I sheathe it behind my back. It's more useful to have both hands free. After all, there are at least a dozen daggers strapped to my body underneath this cloak.

Eian and Lorne rush forward, stopping only when they both hold the tips of their swords within inches of my chest. I've already crushed Eian's little soul on the mat this year, but Lorne might prove a healthy challenge. Bet he's still pissed I killed his closest friend during the third round of challenges after he broke Soleil's finger. Oops.

"Shhh, now, Tavis." Alic draws the blade upward, giving Garrick an impossibly close shave that ties my stomach into knots. "The aristocrats are speaking." His green eyes flare. "Oh, I almost forgot. You're the Duke of Nothing now, aren't you, Riorson? Guess only one of us is still a noble."

I'm not rising to the bait. No, I keep the monster within me leashed, knowing the wrong move, the wrong words will get Garrick killed. Control is the one thing I pride myself on. Everything else is genetics or training.

Take care of each other. That's what Dad ordered when he left for the Battle of Aretia.

I try not to remember the vitriol I spewed at him in response when he wouldn't let us go with him.

"Nothing to say?" Alic taunts. "Fine then. Let's chat about all the things you used to own that now belong to me and see if Tavis here actually has a dragon in that field." He nudges Garrick forward, the blade still at his throat, and motions for me to walk with him. "I bet it takes one look at the position I have you in and incinerates you on the spot. Walk."

I turn my back on Lorne and Eian to move a couple of feet from Garrick's side, keeping my focus split between the whites of Garrick's eyes and the movement of our attackers' shadows in the patchy sunlight as we head toward the clearing.

Lorne presses his sword against my back.

Guess I'll have to kill him first. With us heading west at this

trajectory, if the others keep theirs, we'll intercept, hopefully sooner rather than later.

"Does he have any other weapons on you?" I use my hands to sign close to my body, avoiding the three behind us but catching Garrick's attention. "Blink once for no. Twice for yes."

He blinks once.

That's the best news I've heard all day.

"Don't trip," I sign back.

He subtly gifts me with the middle finger.

"Let's see," Alic drones on as we cross the forest floor. "I own your city—well, the charred remains of it, at least. Dragons don't really leave much when they fire a town, do they?"

"We need to keep him confident," I sign to Garrick. If I've learned anything about Alic Baran in the last seventy-eight days, it's that he won't kill Garrick until he's had his fun humiliating him now that he thinks he has the power. "Need him to make a mistake."

He blinks twice.

A dragon roars to the south, followed by a painful scream. The pressure at my back disappears, and we keep walking.

"And there's the land around your city," Alic continues. "Oh, and that fabulous fortress you call a house. That's mine, too."

"I'm going to need your sword," I sign to Garrick.

He blinks once.

"I'm going to need your sword," I sign again. Stubborn prick.

He rolls his eyes, then blinks them twice.

"Not much for taxes, since all your people are dead." Alic sighs. "Which, of course, is why no other noble has stepped up for your title. Well, your *father's* title. It was never quite yours, was it?"

"Aldwin maneuver," I sign to Garrick, keeping my hands tight against my chest.

He blinks once.

"Fine. Gerwin?" I sign another option. Benefits of training nearly our entire lives together? We have the same combat vocabulary.

He blinks twice.

"It's a wonder we never met before Parapet, really," Alic prattles on. "Your father no doubt kept you from gatherings to keep his

rebellion planning a secret."

"My father kept me away from aristocrats because he knows you're a bunch of entitled pricks who rule in your own best interest," I counter, because fuck him.

We walk into the clearing, and the sun blesses me with a clear view of our attackers' shadows. There's a gap between the swords and my back, which gives me some room to move, but Alic's shadow is merged with Garrick's.

A wave of steam washes over us, and we all still.

My lungs spasm. Standing near a lone tree midway across the field is a giant sapphire-blue dragon with a scar across its snout and swinging a clubtail behind it.

"Hello there," Alic says quietly.

"Is that yours?" I sign to Garrick, hope lighting up my chest.

He blinks once. *No.*

Shit. That hope dies a swift death. Blues are the most ruthless dragons in the Empyrean. They're death machines with pretty scales and a thirst for blood. And if that one wasn't calling Garrick, it's either here to bond one of the assholes behind us or kill us. Neither of which is conducive to our survival.

But at least it's not the navy blue—

A shadow falls over the field, blocking out the sun for a heartbeat before another blue lands beside the clubtail. Its golden eyes narrow on us as it stands to its full height, and just when I think it can't get any bigger, it does. Navy-blue scales. Flicking a daggertail.

Oh *fuck*.

Sgaeyl.

"Sgaeyl," Alic whispers, awestruck.

Of every dragon Kaori projected for us, she is the one he told us not to approach under *any* circumstances. She's not just ruthless, she's flat-out vicious. She abandoned her first rider to his death for cowardice, is rumored to have killed her second, and hasn't bothered with a rider since her last one died, more than forty years ago, before he even left the quadrant. I'm not his direct descendant, but his last name also happened to be Riorson.

My heart starts to pound as she sits and tilts her head as if she's

ready for a show. The clubtail looks in her direction, and she whips her head toward it, snapping her teeth within inches of its snout. The Blue Clubtail swivels, giving her ample space before it settles a dozen feet away.

She turns those golden eyes back on us, and Malek forgive me for my stupidity, but I can't look away.

"Gods*damn*," Eian mutters.

Exactly.

She's not just majestic, she's terrifying, and I am *here* for it.

"Mine," Alic whispers, jarring me from the haze of my thoughts.

His? The fuck she is. Inexplicable rage climbs up my ribs and sits at the base of my throat, but I won't let myself act on it. I breathe in deeply and welcome the frigid air into my lungs, letting it freeze out the anger and leave nothing but the cold, cruel calculation this situation demands.

"Shall we show her that I'm her match?" Alic says, earning every ounce of my attention. Blood trickles down Garrick's throat from the same small cut as before.

Sgaeyl glances to the north before returning her gaze to us, and hope flickers to life again. Someone is coming.

"Show her how you greet royalty, Tavis." Alic scrapes the dagger down the side of Garrick's neck. "On your knees and clean the mud off my boots so I don't get it on her scales when I mount."

"Fuck you," Garrick replies.

A corner of my mouth rises as I watch the bushes to the north start to move. "Do it," I sign.

"Fuck you, too," Garrick says in my direction.

"On your knees!" Alic shrieks.

The Blue Clubtail bares its teeth, and my eyebrows rise. There are too many ill tempers in this field for this to end well for any of us besides the blue ones.

"I would rather die—" Garrick starts.

"Get on your damned knees or Riorson dies," Alic threatens, and the shadows on the ground move as something sharp presses into my cloak. I'm going to be fucking furious if I have to mend this thing when we're done. "I am second in line for the crown of Navarre, and

you are no one!”

Someone clearly has a birth-order complex.

“You’re the son of a dead traitor and you will obey!” Alic shouts. “Get. On. Your. Knees!”

The Blue Clubtail lets out another breath of steam, then retreats into the tall trees at the edge of the field, leaving only its head exposed.

That’s…unexpected.

“Do it,” I sign again.

The knife remains at the side of Garrick’s neck, and his sword scrapes the ground as he lowers himself slowly to his knees. The muscles in his jaw flex. He’s going to kill me for this, but at least he’ll be alive to do it.

Masen pops through the thicket and stumbles into the field. *Finally*. There are now three marked ones here and all bets are off.

“Let’s be clear about something,” I say slowly. “You don’t own anything of mine.”

“I’m sorry?” Alic sputters my way.

“Your father owns my father’s land. Your father owns my father’s title. Your father owns *you*.” I turn my head slowly to look Alic in the eye.

“I am a prince!” he shouts, blood flushing his cheeks as his eyes bulge.

It all happens pretty quickly from there.

I throw my left hand down, palm splayed open. Garrick shoves the pommel of his sword into my hand, then whips his away. The second steel touches my skin, I grip and spin to the left. I jerk the sword up in a backhand motion, cutting into Alic’s forearm and knocking the dagger out of his hand.

Alic shouts in pain, but I don’t bother checking the damage I’ve caused.

Lorne and Eian both lunge, spearing their swords for my chest, so I hit the snow-covered ground, and the two swords clash somewhere above me. Once Garrick moves, so do I.

Eian groans as I jump to my feet, and I find a blade lodged in the vicinity of his heart, with Garrick’s hand covering the jewel-

encrusted hilt of Alic's dagger.

I toss Garrick's sword to him so he can deal with Lorne and turn my attention to Alic.

The prince staggers backward, and blood oozes through the fingers with which he holds his forearm.

Steel clashes behind me, but I don't need to look. Garrick can handle his own. Dukes Lindell and Lewellen saw to it that we both could.

"You can't get away with this," Alic shouts, but his lower lip trembles.

"Draw your sword." I unclip the button at my throat, and my cloak falls to the ground as I stalk forward. Anticipation sings in my veins.

"No." His feet start to shuffle as he backs away from me. "You won't kill an unarmed cadet."

"I will," I assure him as Lorne grunts, then screams in pain behind me. "You deserve to die for what you've put Garrick through since Parapet, and I won't let him carry another single mark from you, and that includes the weight of responsibility for your death. It stops now. Pick. Up. Your. Sword."

"You don't want to do this!" His eyes are wider than fists as his backward pace picks up.

"I do." My arms swing freely at my sides as I hunt him like the prey he's treated us as. I'm more than aware of a set of golden eyes watching every move I make, and I do it anyway. If she's here for me, then she already knows what I'm capable of, and if she's here to kill me, then at least I'll rid the world of Alic before I die. "Draw your weapon. You won't get another warning from me."

"I'm a prince of this kingdom!" He jerks his sword from its scabbard and stops retreating.

"Don't conflate a title with power." I shake my head and close the distance between us.

Fear dilates his eyes as he charges forward without the finesse I'm used to seeing him use on the mat. That fear will be the end of him.

I reach behind my head with both hands, grip the hilts of my

swords, and draw, sidestepping his lunge in the same smooth motion. He recovers with grace, I'll give him that, spinning to face my new angle.

But I'm faster.

My blades converge at his neck, giving him one second to meet my eyes, to realize what's about to happen to him. I draw my arms back and slice his neck clean open. He drops his sword and falls to his knees, clutching his throat as blood spills over his hands, coloring the snow beneath him scarlet.

I watch silently as the life fades from his eyes.

He falls to the side unceremoniously, his stare vacant as blood pools in the snow beneath him.

"Godsdamn," Masen says, his chest heaving from running across the field. "He's definitely dead, then."

"Yes." I nod.

"No final words?" Garrick asks, sheathing his swords as he moves to my side. "Seemed a little anticlimactic without a hero speech."

"I had nothing left to say to him." I clean my blades on Alic's cloak, then slip them into their scabbards on my back.

"You really couldn't leave him for me?" Garrick folds his arms across his chest as Masen checks the other bodies that lie a few feet away.

"No." A twinge of worry unsettles my stomach. "If anyone finds out what happened here, there will be executions, and I can't let your neck be the one they come for."

"You'd rather it be yours." Garrick scoffs and shakes his head, shooting me a look that would wither a lesser man. "Of course. For fuck's sake." He takes a measured breath, then looks at the body. "If anyone sees him like this, they'll know it was a cadet. An investigation will ensue."

Fuck. I didn't think that part through.

"We have to get rid of the bodies," Masen agrees from somewhere behind me.

A low, menacing growl from the right reminds me that someone's already seen.

I turn slowly toward the Blue Daggertail, and this time I

remember to keep my gaze lowered. She's been silently stalking closer this entire time, and when I look up, I find she's less than a dozen feet away. I quickly focus on the gleaming talons of her claws.

If Alic was the rider she intended to bond, then she's going to be rightfully pissed.

"Move." A sharp, feminine voice resounds within me.

"What?" My head snaps up. Did she just talk to *me*? No fucking way.

Her tail flicks forward, and a second later, I'm flying backward. My ass hits the snow and pain erupts on the left side of my face, hotter than any welding fire.

"I do not enjoy repeating myself."

"Xaden!" Garrick shouts and runs in my direction, turning his back on the blue without thought, but Masen shuffles backward, keeping his head bowed.

"She wants us to move." I rise to my feet, and half my vision swims in red.

"You think?" Garrick puts his hands on my face and starts turning my head. "Fuck, she got you. You're split clean open from above your eyebrow to the top of your cheek. I'm surprised you still have an eye."

Heat blasts on our left, melting the snow at our boots, and we all pivot.

Fire surges from Sgaeyl's mouth as she swivels her head in a snakelike motion over Eian's, Lorne's, and Alic's bodies. The scents of sulfur and ash singe my lungs, and my face starts to throb. The bodies disappear into the molten stream, and when it ceases, they are nothing but burned scorch marks. Even their blades cease to exist.

All three of us stare in various states of shock at the charred patches of ground.

"Guess we don't have to worry about anyone finding their bodies," Garrick mutters.

Sgaeyl snaps her head in our direction, and the three of us take a giant step backward.

My heart lodges somewhere in the vicinity of my throat as her

golden eyes narrow on me in challenge. I should retreat again; that's what Kaori would say to do.

Instead, I take a step forward and raise my head, despite the steady stream of blood dripping down my jawline. I will not cower.

Her eyes flare in what I really fucking hope is approval. *"This is not a group activity. Tell your acquaintances to depart."*

My heart hammers.

"You guys need to go." I leave my arms loose at my sides and welcome the cool breeze against the pulsing heat consuming half my face.

"Xaden—" Garrick starts.

"Go." I keep my eyes locked on Sgaeyl. Talking to me is a great sign—it means that she's considering me—but given her history of killing her own rider, I'm not about to overstep on her goodwill. "I'll be fine." Or dead. Either way, Garrick shouldn't have to watch.

"Oh…*oh*." Garrick's footsteps sound behind me, followed by Masen's. "You're sure about this?"

"I am." I hold her gaze without flinching. "I'll see you on the flight field."

"Don't die," he says under his breath, and their footsteps fade out toward the left.

Wind howls through the trees and snow starts to fall again as Sgaeyl and I stare at each other in the middle of the empty field.

"You know who I am." It's not a question.

"Everyone knows who you are, Sgaeyl. Being the most ruthless of your kind earns you a reputation."

"We have that in common, grandson of Maxim Riorson." She lowers her head to a combat position.

My brow furrows and pain flares again as my left eye begins to swell shut. "I'm the grandson of Corbin Riorson. Maxim was my great-uncle."

She blinks. *"If your grandmother said so, I suppose."*

What the fuck? My mind races. Would that mean… No. Dad is the oldest twin and—

"Don't overthink it." She assesses me. *"Why did you kill the royal?"*

"If you're speaking to me, you've already seen inside my head. You already know the answer." My left eye seals shut. So much for depth perception.

"I not only require unflinching honesty from you but for you to have unflinching honesty with yourself, Xaden Riorson." Her stare intensifies, but I hold my stance. *"And if I must clean up your messes, you should at least admit to what causes them."*

"He bullied my best—" I stop myself before I finish the sentence. "I am responsible for the hundred and seven souls that mark my back."

"You are responsible for their loyalty to Navarre, not their lives."

"That's not how I see it." My hands form fists as I search for the right—the honest—words. "I killed Alic because I could. Because I saw an opportunity to rid the world of him and I took it."

She listens silently, her eyes a constant source of judgment, and there's every chance she'll find me lacking, especially if she's seen all the memories I possess. But if she's already seen, then there's no harm in voicing my reasoning. "I was helpless the day they killed my father. I stood there and watched as he was turned into ash. We all did. And I swore I would never be that helpless again. I will never stand idly by while my loved ones are slaughtered." I swallow the knot forming in my throat. "I can't save all hundred and seven of us. I know that. And I don't have a hero complex. I'm not that guy. What I do have is a mission, and I need every marked one possible to survive this place so we can accomplish it. I am responsible for their loyalty, yes. But by giving them mine, I ensure theirs."

"You think I'll disapprove of your mission." She rumbles, but the sound isn't quite a growl. *"Or kill you for breaking the rules of your quadrant."*

It's nearly impossible to keep from flinching. "You are a dragon of the Empyrean, mated to Tairn, the second-largest dragon on the Continent. It's common knowledge that he lost his last rider because of my father's rebellion, so I'm not sure how he'd feel about…me."

"He's not the one making the choice, is he?" Steam blasts across my face, so hot that I half expect my skin to blister, and holy *fuck* it hurts. *"He will live with my decision, and I suspect one day I'll have*

to live with his."

Don't question her choices. Noted.

"I'll give you my honesty if you give me yours." I take a fortifying breath.

Sgaeyl's eyes narrow to slits.

"Do you know what's happening out there?" I gesture behind me. "Do you know why my father attempted to secede from Navarre?"

She waits so long that I start to wonder if she's ever going to answer. *"I do."*

I nod. "And do you know what I will do with whatever power you channel to me?"

"Do you*, Xaden Riorson?"* She comes close enough that I could reach out and touch her snout if I dared. *"You need not question me. I have seen your soul. Every haunted memory, every vile thought, every malevolent desire for revenge. I am cognizant of your downfalls, and yet I see the potential of everything you can become. I see it* all*."*

My chest constricts. She's really choosing me. Not even Garrick knows the true depth of what I'm capable of, the parts I keep hidden from everyone. My mother left. My father died. There isn't a single person on the Continent who truly knows me.

Until now.

"Say it." Her eyes almost glow with their intensity. *"Tell me what you will do with all this power* after *you accomplish your mission?"*

I'll give her unflinching honesty.

"If I live through it?" I let the monster slip its leash a fraction of an inch. "I'd love nothing more than to burn this place to the fucking ground." To a dragon, there's nothing as sacred as the Vale, their hatching grounds Basgiath was put here to protect. I've just pulled the dragon equivalent of baring my throat.

Sgaeyl lifts her head. *"And thus, we begin."*



631 AU
Chradh—Brown Scorpiontail
(Male) Descended from the Aldayrmar Line
Estimated Age: 27
Recorded Riders: 0

—The Compendium of Dragonkind,
last updated by Colonel Valin Kaori



Garrick

Pretty damn sure I just left my best friend to die in that field back there with that nightmare of a Blue Daggertail, and there's not a single thing I can do about it. Bonding isn't really a spectator sport, and there are no points for teamwork.

Not that Xaden would let me help him even if I could.

Stubborn fucking asshole.

"You all right?" Masen asks as we trek south into a dense grouping of tall pine trees.

"Yeah." No. Not really. The pressure in my chest is going to crack my ribs open. But I'm not about to say that to another marked one. Xaden's job is to lead. Mine is to help him, to protect his back, to keep him safe—even from himself. Being *all right* has jack and shit to do with any of it.

You are my pride, Garrick, my heart. But he is Tyrrendor's. He must live. Tyrrendor only survives if he does. That was the last thing my father said before riding off at Fen Riorson's side, ever the dutiful aide. He'd looked me in the eye, pointed to Xaden as he'd given his command, kissed the top of my head like I was still a toddler in his eyes, then departed for the Battle of Aretia.

He'd be livid if he knew I just left Tyrrendor's hope to face down a dragon on his own, but staying might have lessened his chances of living through it.

Zihnal, let him survive.

"Your mission is accomplished, Garrick Tavis." A gravelly, older voice accented with a light burr consumes my head for the third time today, catching me off guard. *"Now bring yourself here."*

I trip over a tree root and have to throw my arms out to catch my balance. Fuck this growth spurt and what it's done to my usually unparalleled coordination. As soon as I make it through this day, I'm going to live in the gym until I can kick Xaden's ass on the mat again.

I need to see Masen is safe first. I think it with clear intent and hope the dragon that's been calling me since we arrived at the forest hears, that he understands.

The impatient sigh rattling my brain implies I may have achieved the first goal but perhaps not the second. I hadn't realized how badly I wanted an older dragon, one who's lived through the history we're fighting, until I heard his voice, but even having memorized the cards, I can't immediately think of which of those willing to bond are leaning into their middling years.

"I can't believe any of that just happened," Masen mutters as we make it through the copse, into a section of the forest where the pine trees grow wider than a dragon and so tall they split the sky.

Snow filters through the branches, gathering in the wide spaces between trees.

"Me either." I rake my hand over my hair and, with a series of deep breaths, try to dispel the crushing sensation in my chest. I just watched Xaden kill Prince Alic. Not that the prick didn't deserve it—he did. We'd somehow managed to keep the royal pain in my ass from slitting my throat, and on a day like today, when rules are suggestions and ethics are hypothetical, it feels like I was just given a third chance at life.

I used the second long ago to get my mother out of Aretia before the Navarrians came for us. Before they dragged us to the executions. Before she ended up like Sloane and Liam's dad, secretly slaughtered in the courtyard of their home.

Gods, I hope Sloane is all right. She hasn't been fostered by secret sympathizers like some of us have.

"Riorson will live, right?" Masen asks, glancing over his shoulder. "We're all fucked if anything happens to him. Not that I doubt Bodhi's ability to lead, but we both know he doesn't want—"

"Riorson will live," I answer with far more certainty than I feel. "And he'll bond the most formidable dragon on the Continent." Let's see who dares to fuck with him once *that* happens. With a dragon like Sgaeyl, he could manifest a signet that will turn the tides of this war. But a dragon like that…well, she would have burned us all alive if she hadn't wanted him, right?

"He'll live," Masen repeats, holding himself a little taller.

I'd better be right.

"What happened to Soleil?" I blow on my hands to warm them up and brace for his answer. The snow's started again, in what has to be the earliest recorded snowfall in Basgiath history, but I leave the hood of my cloak down. Being caught unaware by Alic was an atypical mistake that could have gotten me—or worse, Xaden—killed, and I won't muffle even one of my senses now.

"Flew off on a Brown Clubtail," he answers, cleaning his glasses

for the third time since Sgaeyl steamed us.

"Good." A smile creeps across my face. With one dragon calling to me, another bonding Soleil, and Sgaeyl considering Xaden, that means we were right. There are dragons here who are on our side and this isn't a death sentence of a day. There's hope, and not just for the ten of us but for the ninety-seven yet to come.

There's hope for *her* next year, and that's what matters.

I've loved her from the first time she punched me in the face at nine years old for suggesting she saddle a reliable horse over the barely broken one she'd selected, and I could never live with myself if I thought she was coming here only to die.

I find myself glancing south, toward home—the opposite direction of the dragon tugging at me. The yearning hits so deep, so hard, that I splay a hand over my chest to try to muffle the ever-present ache. It took weeks to travel here on horseback, and I would give *anything* to cross those hundreds of miles and mountains if just to see her face for a heartbeat. She needs to know we have a fighting shot here, that all our training isn't for naught. She's lost more than most of us, and she deserves to taste hope.

Wingbeats fill the air, and my head snaps upward as the Blue Daggertail flies overhead, banked at an angle that reveals Xaden secure in her seat.

Relief nearly takes me out at my knees, so profound that I can't bring myself to speak or even smile. All I can do is nod as my oldest friend flies off. Xaden's bonded Sgaeyl. If he can hold her to the flight field, Tyrrendor still has her hope, and Aretia—while wounded—still has her heir. At least until some Navarrian noble decides to claim the ruined land out of spite. We're one step closer to not only surviving the test that was meant to kill us but coming out of the crucible more powerful than even General Sorrengail could have imagined when she struck that deal with Xaden.

"Yes!" Masen shouts, throwing his fist into the air.

Thank you, Dunne. The goddess of war surely favors Xaden in a way she never blessed his father.

The sound of pounding footsteps draws our attention eastward.

A first-year from Second Wing races in our direction from about

fifty yards away, her blond braid swinging as she screams, "Help!"

"Run." My stomach lunges for the ground, and I brace for movement, but Masen reaches for my forearm and grips. Hard.

"No," he whispers as an Orange Clubtail comes skidding around a tree, its claws leaving deep trenches in the forest floor as it turns to face us. "We stay."

Shit. He's right. We should help. Not sure how, but…we'll make it happen.

"Not me!" the cadet shouts over her shoulder, her arms pumping as she sprints in our direction. I vaguely recognize her as one of the squadmates who like to taunt Bryn. "Kill them! They're the separatist dogs!"

Any instinct to help evaporates instantly.

"That's not the insult you think it is," Masen calls out. "Dogs are quite loyal."

What in Amari's name? My entire body is poised to run as I glance Masen's way, my eyebrows shooting upward. "We have to run." I prepare to shove him if I have to. Hell, I'll pick him up and throw him over my shoulder. Oranges are unpredictable as fuck, and I'm not about to let us become its next target.

"No," he insists, planting his feet.

What *is* it with stubborn Tyrrish friends today?

The Orange Clubtail takes three bounding steps, then opens its massive jaws and curls its tongue. I suck in a sharp breath and hold it as fire spews from its mouth, incinerating the cadet. The heat from the blast washes over us, singeing my skin and blowing our capes back.

I take in the sulfur-scented air only once the orange closes its mouth.

"Want to run *now*?" I ask Masen.

He shakes his head, lets go of my arm, and starts to walk *toward* the orange as the steam fades from his glasses. "She's mine."

Oh. Now, that's something I understand.

"I'll see you on the flight field!" he calls back over his shoulder with a wide grin.

"You're testing my patience." The tugging sensation returns twice

as strong as before, pulling me westward again.

I lower my eyes when the Orange Clubtail glares in my direction, then obey the instinct pulling me to the right. For the second time today, I leave a friend to stare down possible death.

But possible is immeasurably better than certain.

I'm coming. At least, I think I am. I was sure I'd locate the source of the voice in the clearing, but all I found were two angry blues, and one glance told me neither of them was him. I send up another prayer to Dunne, this time on Masen's behalf, and continue west toward a grouping of enormous boulders.

"Will you always put others before your own interests?" he asks as the snow picks up.

I don't always put others first. I want plenty of things for myself. I glance to the north, then the south, looking for the best possible route around the rock formation, because I'm sure as Malek not climbing over it.

"Wanting something—someone—for yourself is not the same. It is action *that matters, and you have a history of acting in the interest of others."*

Or maybe the interests of others align with mine. I grimace as snow pelts me in the face. Can't anything here be soft? I change my route slightly, choosing to take the southward path around the boulders. It's the snowier track, but north feels wrong. And at least I'll be able to see the footsteps of other cadets in the snow.

"I know all about your interests, Garrick Tavis." The burr in his tone catches on the *R*s in my name. *"I know the power you'll need to pursue them."*

Then you know I'll do whatever it takes. I shield my eyes with my hand and trudge forward as visibility turns shitty.

"It is why I seek your bloodline."

That comment raises my brows, but I keep moving forward, curving around the largest of the boulders.

"Why I seek you*."*

Earth moves to my right, and I leap out of the way, my heart jumping through my ribs as the boulder unfurls, shaking the snow from its deep-brown scales to reveal a large dragon with a

scorpiontail.

I stare up at him, dumbfounded. I've always prided myself on my skills of observation, and now I've been completely floored for the second time today.

He flares his wings, shaking the snow from their tips and revealing numerous scars in the translucent membrane before he tucks them in again. *"I, too, find myself bewildered at your lack of awareness."*

"I'll do better," I promise him, studying the pattern of his horns and placing him from the cards Kaori insisted we memorize.

"I know. Yet another reason I have finally chosen to involve myself with your kind again." He stares at me with unblinking golden eyes.

"You're Chradh," I say slowly, just in case I'm wrong, because the *again* and his voice have definitely thrown me off.

"Now that introductions have been made…" He stands to his full height. *"Shall we depart? While the snow doesn't bother me, I have no wish to lose you to frostbite after finally having chosen you."*

There's that *finally* again. "According to Kaori, you've never bonded before. You're only twenty-seven years old." It doesn't make sense.

"What even is a year?" He tilts his head. *"Now, is the weather too difficult for you?"* he asks in snarky challenge.

"It might surprise you to find that *nothing* is too difficult for me." I flex my fingers to wake them up, then sprint for his foreleg. The snow causes my right boot to slip on his scales midway through the approach, but my left catches. I muscle my way up, thankful for all the rock-climbing lessons Lewellen forced on me, and make it over his shoulder.

"Quite the contrary. I'm depending on it."

I brush the snow from his pommel scales, hunker down in the seat, and we launch into the sky.

My heart soars as we land in the flight field a half hour later.

I may be the last to arrive, but all ten of us have bonded. All ten are riders.

Fuck you, Navarre.



632 AU
Cath—Red Swordtail
(Male) Descended from the Berradhdyr Line
Estimated Age: 89
Recorded Riders: 2

—The Compendium of Dragonkind,
last updated by Colonel Valin Kaori



Dain

"The only other words I have to offer you are 'good luck.'" Kaori takes a long look at us, and I have a sinking feeling that he's trying to memorize our faces so he can project them later if needed. Then he nods to himself and walks off toward the right, vanishing among

the trees that lead up the hill from the bowl-shaped valley that will entomb some of us.

Being the last professor to see us all alive—the professor responsible for preparing us for such a deadly day—must be a tiresome burden to bear.

The squads around me break up, some heading directly into the woods while others hang back to say goodbye to their friends.

"Want to go in together?" Cianna asks, tying up her blond curls behind her head as she turns toward me. Out of everyone in our squad, she's the one I get along with best.

"We're supposed to go in by ourselves." I ignore the impulse to give in to the fear that has me in a choke hold. It would be nice, comforting even, to have a friend out there, but dragons prefer to see if a rider can stand on their own.

"I heard some of the squads in Fourth Wing are planning a team approach." She glances to the right, where Fourth Wing seems to be forming smaller groups.

"Only the ones who like to push the boundaries of the rules." Aura glances sideways at me. "I bet you're glad you didn't get put into Xaden Riorson's squad. Rumor is that guy's got it out for you."

"Just because Dain's dad is General Sorrengail's aide," Cianna says, like that somehow makes it better. "And…you know. He helped her hunt down Fen Riorson for execution."

"Bet he'd love to challenge you." Aura cocks her head to the side and studies me.

"Yeah, well, his dad killed my best friend's older brother during that pointless rebellion, so trust me, the feeling's mutual." I've been checking around dark corners for Xaden Riorson from the moment I crossed the parapet. First, because the arrogant asshole wields *shadows* of all things, and second, because his desire for my death isn't exactly a secret, though he hasn't come after me. Thank gods Violet is headed into the Scribe Quadrant next year, because Riorson would probably break every rule in the Codex to kill her.

I just need to hope Riorson isn't going to use Threshing as an excuse to kill *me*.

"Cadet Aetos!" Dad's voice booms from behind us, and I lock my

jaw to keep from visibly cringing.

I love my father. He's the epitome of what a rider should be: loyal, steadfast, and regimented. He's everything I want to be in a few years, and making him proud is my first and foremost objective in the quadrant. But how the hell am I supposed to stand on my own if he doesn't stop hovering?

"Daddy's calling." Aura smirks and my face heats. "Maybe his dragon could bond you, too, and then you'd always be together!" Her shrill laugh grates on my last nerve as she walks off toward the trees.

"Good luck." Cianna smacks me on the shoulder and smiles reassuringly. "See you on the flight field."

"You too." I take a deep breath, prepare myself for the list of how I've undoubtably disappointed him recently, then turn to face my fate.

Dad waits with his arms folded about fifteen feet away at the base of the hill, which means there's a good chance he's heard everything we just said. He has an uncanny ability to hear everything I don't want him to and nothing I need him to. Then again, he hasn't listened to anything I've had to say since Mom took off while we were stationed in Luceras. Considering Dad swears it was because Mom inferred he wasn't capable of protecting her with the Tyrs rebelling, I give him a little grace for smothering me.

But he has to stop. The other cadets are noticing, and not only does it embarrass the shit out of me, it might hurt my chances at entering leadership.

"Dad." I lift my hand in greeting, then head his way.

"Dad?" He quirks an eyebrow.

"Sir," I quickly correct.

Already disappointing him and the conversation hasn't even started yet.

"I'd think you'd be happier to see me, Dain," he lectures once I close the distance between us.

"I saw you last week. When you sat in on Battle Brief. Exactly five chairs down from me." I cross my arms in front of my chest, more than aware of our resemblance. We have the same brown

eyes, same build, same brown hair, and even the same mannerisms. Maybe that's why Mom left me behind, because I'm a reminder of him. That doesn't explain why she stopped writing to me last year, though. I have a feeling that has to do with my decision to volunteer for the Riders Quadrant, but I might never know what really happened, and that kills me.

"I was evaluating Devera's teaching methods." He waves his hand as if he can brush off every instance that he's butted in over the last few months.

"Right." I scratch the scruff growing on my jawline and lift my brows at him. "And you needed to see Kaori right after my class the week before that, and you had to ask Emetterio a question during one of my challenges—"

"Most cadets are completely cut off from their family. I'd hoped you'd be grateful I've found ways to be present in your life during your first year." He bristles and color rises along his collar, a sure sign that I've struck a nerve. "All within the rules, of course."

"Of course." Shit. Guilt settles in my stomach like lead, and I immediately regret saying anything. Naturally he's overprotective. We're the only family each other has. I couldn't imagine sending my only child into the quadrant, knowing there's an overwhelming chance I'd never see them again.

"I just…" His eyes soften. "I just wanted to lay eyes on you."

My shoulders dip. "I'm glad to see you—"

"Second Wing," he interrupts with a wistful tone, eyeing the patch on my shoulder. "You'll be a great wingleader for Second Wing, just like I was in my day."

No pressure or anything. "I'll do my best—"

"What's going on there?" His brow knits as he looks past me, and I glance over my shoulder to see what has him riled. Xaden Riorson's cousin—another first-year—is talking to a few cadets with rebellion relics at the edge of the forest. Most of them are in Fourth Wing, but Imogen Cardulo is one of ours.

"Oh. Bodhi Durran's probably giving a pep talk to some of the marked ones." I turn back toward my father.

His eyes narrow. "There are four of them."

"Yes. I think there are fifteen marked ones this year, divided pretty evenly among the wings." Their presence was a major point of contention the first couple of months, given what their parents put our kingdom through, but most personal issues have been settled on the mat per quadrant tradition. "We have three in Second Wing, including Cardulo, and they're all split between sections and squads, so it's not like they're violating Addendum—"

"For right *now*." Color rises to the top of his neck as he glares in their direction. "They know the Code of Conduct changed this year and they can't gather in groups of three, let alone four."

"They're not gathered, Dad." I tilt my head and lean in to his line of sight. "No more than if formation had just broken or if they ran into each other in the academic wing."

"Does he do that often?" He lowers his hands to his sides and his fists clench. "Give *pep talks*?"

"Sometimes, I guess." Other times I've seen the second-years coaching them. "I wouldn't really know, considering they're not in my wing. But I understand why they stick together when they can. Some of the cadets don't think they should be here, and I've heard a lot of them are nervous the dragons will kill them—"

"They weren't supposed to live last year," he hisses in a whisper.

My jaw all but unhinges. "You don't mean that."

"And now two of them are already *squad leaders*. As second-years. It's…unfathomable." His face is fully flushed now, and he's practically shaking.

"The dragons vouched for them. Their intentions. Their loyalty," I say softly. "We never question dragons, right?" It goes against everything he's taught me.

He grasps my shoulders and stares into my eyes with an intensity that makes him look like a stranger. "You don't know the things I do, son. They might look like innocent kids being punished for their parents' transgressions, but they're not."

"Are you serious?" I search his eyes, but he has no reason to lie to me.

His fingertips dig painfully into my shoulders. "I can't tell you because it's classified, but you can't trust them. Not any of them, but

especially not Riorson."

"Dad, if they're committing crimes, then bring them up on charges—"

"I don't have enough proof. Yet. That's why I need you." His grip eases. "I shouldn't even be telling you this, but I love you, and I need you to be on guard. I need you to…"

"To what?" My brows scrunch. How can he possibly expect me to act on something when he doesn't even have all the facts?

"Tell me if they break the Codex." He smooths his hands over my shoulders, then pats me like I'm a child. "You can do that for me, right?"

I shake my head. "If they break the Codex, they'll be handled by the chain of command as the Codex and the Code of Conduct dictate," I argue. "Those are the rules, and you've always taught me that the way to make you proud—the way to survive this place—is to follow the Codex to the letter, because the dragons established the rules and their word is law."

"Yes, of course." He nods. "You trust me, don't you, Dain?"

Talk about a gut punch.

"Of course I do, Dad." I wince. "Sir."

"Then trust me now." He looks away. When his gaze returns to mine, it's softened, and he looks like my dad again. "I'm also worried Riorson will challenge you." His face falls.

My back stiffens. "I've won every challenge but one—"

"And he's never lost on the mat. Not once." Dad swallows and gently squeezes the tops of my arms. "Do you remember what I told you about how he got those scars on his back?"

"I do." Nausea rolls through my stomach as wingbeats sound in the distance.

"Now imagine he has the opportunity to exact his revenge on Violet." Dad's face crumples. "I love her like a daughter, but we both know she'd never be able to defend herself. She's good with a dagger, but her frail little body… They'd break her into a thousand pieces."

Every muscle in my body tenses. "She's safe on main campus. She'll be safe with the scribes next year." All she's ever wanted is to

live within cases of books and, by gods, if anyone deserves to get their dream, it's Violet, especially after losing both Brennan and her father.

"As long as the marked ones don't break the Codex and track her down," he says quietly.

"They wouldn't." Fear oozes down my spine, leaving a chill in its wake.

"Just…" Dad sighs. "Keep an eye out for her sake. I know you wouldn't want her in danger. You two have always been so close, and I know she misses you."

I nod. "She's my best friend." Once I get out of here, and she graduates from the Scribe Quadrant, maybe…more. What I feel for Violet is incredibly complicated, and I haven't let myself think past surviving each day. Everything else has to wait. Then again, at the rate this place changes people, there's every chance she won't recognize me next year, when we earn the privilege of visiting other quadrants.

"Look at that," Dad says, glancing up.

The sky fills with color as the willing dragons fly overhead, and we both look up to watch the spectacle. According to Kaori, there are one hundred and thirty-seven willing to bond this year, which is far less than last year. There are many more of us than there are of them. The riot drops into the enormous forest, disappearing into the trees.

My throat knots. That forest either holds my future or my demise.

Dad pats my arms again and then drops his hands. "I really didn't mean to burden you with all this. Not on such a momentous day." He smiles. "Now, you get in there and claim your green."

I blink at the quick change of subject. "I'm thinking of a red."

He blanches. "Oh, no. A red would be too ill-tempered for you. Listen to me on this, son. I'm speaking from experience. You should approach a green. They'll respect your honorable nature and your dedication to Navarre. And I asked Foirn to speak to the others in his den on your behalf." A sheepish smile curves his mouth.

Oh. Gods. "I'm sure the dragons *loved* that. They're big on

nepotism, you know."

"Yes, I'm the worst father ever, trying to ensure the survival of my only son," he teases, then gives my arms a final squeeze. "We'll talk about the marked ones later. Earn your flight leathers."

"Dad." I fight to swallow the tangled knot in my throat. "The other cadets can't think I'm being given special treatment. If I bond today, if I fly out of this valley as a rider, I want you to stop hovering."

"Survive today and I won't need to." He nods. "Make me proud."

"Yes, sir." I wait until he leaves, then turn back to the forest, feeling considerably more stressed and just as afraid as before he arrived.

I would do anything for him, but sometimes it feels so fucking heavy being his son.

He loves me. He means well. He and Violet are the only people in my life who have never let me down. Never lied to me. Never picked up and left when talking proved too difficult. I have no reason not to trust him, not when he's the one who stayed. So fine, I'll keep an eye out to see if the kids with rebellion relics are breaking the Codex. It's the least I can do for the man who has given me everything, and if it keeps Violet safe, then even better.

The forest is quiet as I walk under the canopy, officially the last cadet to enter the woods.

The crisp fallen leaves crackle beneath my boots as I head south, choosing a central path to optimize my chances of finding the right dragon. But I also need to remove myself from the path of any *wrong* dragons to survive this. Funny that it's a childhood of climbing trees with Violet, and not months of training in the quadrant, that's about to come in handy.

Twenty minutes later, I find the perfect tree. It's tall enough for dragons to walk under but has enough dead, broken bits of branch to scale safely. I choose my handholds carefully, test their strength, and start climbing.

I have to traverse around the tree in places, and I'm sweating by the time I reach the first full branch I trust to support my weight, but it's pretty perfect for my purposes. Twenty feet in the air should

be about right. Reaching up, I grab hold of the next branch for the sake of balance, then settle in and wait.

The lone Blue Clubtail considering bonding this year passes underneath first—no fucking thank you—followed by a pair of oranges whose tails swing in time. Kind of wonder if they're mated and looking for another set of twins to bond like the Wyckleys. None of the three feel like mine, so I sit tight and wish Sawyer Henrick luck when he walks by.

"Shit!" Someone screams above me, and my head jerks upward as a shape tumbles through the branches, smacking limb after limb on the way down. Not a shape. A cadet.

I straddle the branch about four feet from the trunk, then lock my ankles beneath as a redhead barrels toward me.

I reach out, and leather skims over my hands, but I get a grip on the back bottom of her uniform top, and her belt slams into my hands. Then I hold on with all I have.

The world spins as her momentum slows, and the belt digs into my hands so hard I'm surprised it doesn't cut straight through me, but I don't let go. When we come to a stop, I'm hanging upside down, and blood rushes to my head as she stops flailing.

"Aetos!" Joelle Tadita, a second-year, looks over her shoulder at me, her eyes wide with fear.

"Hold on," I grit out through my teeth, then haul her upward, going on pure adrenaline. "Reach!"

She grabs hold of the branch. "Got it!"

I let go, and she dangles for a second before dropping to the branch a few feet beneath. Only when I see that she has her balance do I pull myself up with my abdominals, grab hold of my own branch, and let my legs fall. Then I lower myself to the same branch she's standing on, her chest heaving as she catches her breath.

"What are you doing in a tree?" I ask, steadying myself by splaying my fingers over the trunk.

"Observing like a good second-year." She holds one hand over her heart. "Thank you for catching me. I owe you one."

"No problem." I hold out my hand. There's a red welt across the

center of it, and the second I notice, both my palms begin to throb.

"You're good in a tree." She takes my hand and we turn awkwardly on the branch so she's closest to the trunk.

"I had a good teacher." A smile curves my mouth as she starts to climb down. "Try not to fall out of another one today. I might not be in that one to help out."

"Yeah, yeah." She blows a red curl out of her face and jumps to the ground. "Good luck up—" Her head turns west, and she smiles. "There's a green coming!" She runs off to the north, and I move back to my previous perch.

A green. Exactly what my father hoped for. Arranged. Whatever.

My heart starts to pound as the heavy footsteps approach. He'll be proud of me. He'll trust me the way I do him, and he'll ease up on the constant hovering.

Trees move to the east, and my attention pivots.

A Red Swordtail with scales the deep shade of a tomato walks between the trees, its tail knocking the leaves off the branches as it stalks in my direction, snarling at the approaching green. Its head is low in the firing position, its golden eyes shifting, assessing the potential battlefield in a way that reminds me of how I searched for the perfect tree.

The green maneuvers to the right of the tree, while the red prepares to pass on the left. They'll be underneath me in a matter of seconds, and every instinct bellows to go red.

"Whatever will you choose, Dain Aetos?" A snarling, masculine voice barrels through my head, emphasizing the *S*s. *"Choose wrong, and I'll discover how long it takes to burn you to ash."*

My chest cranks tight, like my ribs are trying to squeeze the breath out of me. One of the dragons is talking to me, which means he's *mine*. But which one?

I should go right—to the green. He has to be the one speaking. That's what logic dictates. That's what Dad wants.

But this will be the most important relationship in my life, and what I want, how I feel matters, too.

Dunne be with me. I leap left.

My boots hit solidly between the red's shoulders, just in front of

the seat, and my knees bend to absorb the impact.

The red's head swivels around at an impossible angle, and I throw my arms out for balance as it unhinges its jaw and roars. Heat and sulfur blast me in the face, and the pure force of the sound shakes every scale beneath my feet. I recognize his face from the cards—Cath.

Oh. Shit. I'd better be *really* fucking sure he's the one, or I'm about to spend the rest of the day getting reacquainted with Violet's dad and Brennan.

"How sure are you?" the voice asks, and everything shifts. Muscles ripple beneath me as the red bolts forward.

Momentum hurtles me backward, and my feet come flying out from under me. I grab for the pommels, but I hit the hard ridge of scale with my chin instead. White-hot pain erupts in my face, but there's no time to process it. Not with Cath launching into the sky.

"I'm sure!" I shout, slipping backward as he climbs with sweeping beats of his wings. I grasp the pommel scales with my aching hands. Then I pull with all my strength, hauling my body into the seat. My toes find the grooves between his scales, and I hunker down against his back as he pulls us into a stomach-curdling vertical climb.

"You would go against your father? Your superior officer?"

Cath reaches a peak and our momentum stalls for just a heartbeat. The world goes quiet, and in that moment, I touch what feels inexplicably like…peace.

We're hundreds of feet above the ground, and up here, nothing else matters. Not my father. Not whatever challenge is called next. Not the quadrant. My life hangs in the balance of the next minute, the actions of the dragon beneath me, and it makes everything else insignificant, meaningless.

Gravity calls, and Cath tucks his wings as we dive.

"There is no bond more vital than that of a dragon and its rider," I yell, locking my muscles to hold my seat. "No order may surpass its importance, or it is deemed unlawful. Article one, section three—"

"Do you give allegiance to the Codex while you ride the edge of Malek's doorstep?"

I clench my thighs even harder as Cath banks right, throwing my

weight in the opposite direction to maintain my hold as he starts to spiral. The horizon rotates over and over as wind whips across my face. He's right. Codex isn't going to save me up here. "No."

"Then what truly holds your allegiance?" He straightens, and the world evens out.

"You." My heartbeat steadies. More than ever, I'm certain the voice is Cath's, that I've made the right choice.

He swivels his head just enough to look over his shoulder at me. *"Never forget that. It is the only condition of* my *allegiance."*

"Never," I promise. Nothing—no one—could be more important, more essential than the bond I feel clicking into place. It makes even Dad's meddling feel inconsequential. For the first time in my life, I'm connected to someone I can't disappoint, because he already knows everything about me.

Cath turns his head back toward the horizon, and we fly as one.



632 AU
Cuir—Green Swordtail
(Male) Descended from the Uaineloidsig Line
Estimated Age: 59
Recorded Riders: 1

—The Compendium of Dragonkind,
last updated by Colonel Valin Kaori



Bodhi

"Any last questions?" I ask, making pointed eye contact with each of the three marked ones. My heart beats wildly as we stand at the edge of the forest, but I keep my facial expression neutral. Telling them I'm terrified, too, isn't going to help our cause, and while

dragons enjoy deference, they tend to make overly scared cadets crispy.

And if there's one thing I've gotten good at, it's keeping my feelings to myself.

"Watch your backs for petty cadets bearing grudges. Find your dragons. Don't die. Pretty sure that sums it up." Imogen Cardulo blows a strand of short pink hair out of her eyes before leveling me with a look that says my pre-Threshing motivational speech wasn't all that motivating.

Can't blame her. I'm not exactly a leader, nor have I ever wanted to be one. My cousin, Xaden, got all the inspirational, magnetic genes in the family, and I received whatever was left over. Usually, I'm perfectly fine with the distribution of our talents. He was born to lead the duchy of Aretia, and that kind of magnetism doesn't fade just because Navarre stripped my uncle of his title before they executed him and my parents in the same manner as our city. I'm skilled at keeping everything running in the background so Xaden can be free to do Xaden-like shit. I'm also really damn good at keeping Xaden from being too much…Xaden. It's a fine balance between supporting my cousin and making sure his ruthless ass doesn't end up executed, too.

Most days, I'm content with that role. But today, I'd love to have an ounce of the confidence that landed him Sgaeyl, making him one of the most powerful riders in the quadrant as a second-year. Today, I'd love to have the power he does to inspire others and take away my friends' fear. But more than anything, just for today, I want to walk into this forest as my own man, to be seen as more than Xaden Riorson's cousin.

As it is, sometimes I feel like I'm one of Kaori's projections of Xaden; I resemble him enough to earn both hatred and respect, depending on who's looking, but lack the power to make the same impact he does.

But I told Xaden I'd lead the others when I can, and Durrans don't go back on their word. I promised my father I never would, and I meant it.

"I think we've got it," Ciaran agrees, his complexion a little

ruddier than normal today.

"Good—" I spare a glance over his shoulder at where Colonel Aetos is talking to his son, and my heart rate skyrockets when I catch the colonel watching us. "We need to break this up. Now." We're at an official quadrant event, but the four of us being alone together lands us in a gray area when it comes to the Code of Conduct.

The others look back and all of them tense, even Imogen.

"Stick to the west," I remind them. "We'll meet up tonight."

We nod at one another, then split up, heading into the shaded forest. I take the westernmost path as instructed, and the others disappear behind the countless varieties of trees.

"You did well with the speech."

"For fuck's sake!" My hand flies to the center of my chest as Xaden appears at my side as though he'd been walking there the entire time. I shake my head. "You have to stop doing that." He's become a menace with those shadows of his, but I'm grateful for the cover they provide when we need secrecy. Which is pretty much always around here.

"Do I, though?" His smirk fades quickly. "I mean it. You did well with the others. Ciaran left with more conviction than he arrived with."

"I could have done better, but I'm not you." It comes out a little more petulant than I'd prefer.

"No one asked you to be." He shoots me a look, then grasps my shoulders and turns me, stopping us in the middle of the forest. His eyes bore into mine as he leans down slightly, bringing our gazes level. "Bodhi, no one asks, expects, or wants you to be me."

"Yeah." I force a quick, easy grin. "Of course. Only if you die, right?"

Naturally, he sees straight through it.

"I'm not going to die, and even if I did, we're no longer held to the *heir and spare* positions." He lifts the eyebrow Sgaeyl scarred last year. "We have no title to defend anymore, remember?"

"True." I sigh. "But the council—"

"Fuck the council. I'm doing more than enough to keep them

happy.” He clasps the back of my neck. “You are exceptional, and worth a thousand of me. You are calm when I’m unreasonable and steady when I’m volatile. You inherited every admirable quality of your mother’s while I seem to have acquired every disreputable one from my father.” He lets me go, then ruffles the tight curls on the top of my head like we’re kids again. “Being too much like me would only detract from your excellence.”

“Thanks.” My barely there smile is genuine this time, and we begin walking again, heading deeper into the forest. That’s another skill he’s developed in the last year that I lack—the gift of saying whatever someone needs to hear at the exact moment they need to hear it. “You’re not supposed to be out here, you know.”

“I’m observing.” His shrug raises, then lowers the swords he keeps strapped to his back.

I prefer mine at my hip. “Not interfering?”

“As if I would ever break the Codex when no one’s looking,” he quips sarcastically.

“So you’re just observing *me*?” My back stiffens. “Why? Because you don’t think I’ll make it on my own?”

“No,” he counters. “I’m just here to pass a mess—” He throws his hand in front of me, effectively halting our steps, and his head swings left.

A second later, I hear voices approaching from the southeast.

Fuck, even Xaden’s hearing is better than mine.

“I just don’t think it’s fair that they get the same chances we do,” a guy whines as he walks with three other cadets from First Wing. I know that voice. It’s the cadet who broke Norwood’s nose during breakfast a few days ago. He and his friends have made the lives of the marked ones in First Wing *painful*.

Shadows swirl around Xaden and me as we move quietly to the shelter of the nearest tree.

“Their parents nearly tore this kingdom apart,” a girl agrees.

Awesome. They’re talking about us. My jaw clenches. If they had any idea what’s really happening beyond our borders, maybe they’d understand the choices our parents made.

“Right?” the first replies. “And now they have two squad leaders.

Can you imagine graduating and being put under the command of a fucking separatist's kid?"

Xaden's mouth quirks upward, and I fight a grin.

The fact that both he and Garrick are squad leaders in our wing may aggravate the shit out of the Navarrians, but it's a point of pride to those of us who wear rebellion relics. Only exceptional cadets are chosen to be squad leaders, and knowing Xaden and Garrick have both risen to leadership gives hope to the rest of us that we won't be judged only on the actions of our parents but might be allowed to stand on our own merit.

We didn't choose to be here, but we can make our own decisions now that we are.

"It's bad enough to have one Riorson in charge, but his doppelgänger is coming up through Fourth Wing right underneath him," another girl complains, their voices growing louder as they come closer.

My smile slips. Do Xaden and I look alike? Sure, that's genetics. But we have different eyes, complexions, hair, and builds. He's got two inches and at least twenty pounds on me.

Xaden catches my eye, lifts his hand, then points toward the south, where flashes of red peek through the dense trees. A Red Scorpiontail is approaching. I stare at the glistening ruby scales and focus inward, trying to locate whatever Kaori insists we'll feel when we know a particular dragon is ours.

"And you know they're helping each other," the first guy mutters. "Durran fights just like Riorson. It's why he hasn't lost a single challenge yet."

Both Xaden and I grin. Fine. That's true. I can't wait to see their faces when Liam gets here next year and destroys them all on the mat. Xaden spent years training him. My fingers skim the newly sewn Gauntlet patch on my chest. I bet Liam wears one just like this next year, too. He's the best of us.

The red appears fully, stepping into the wide space between two trees, and my heartbeat falters as it growls at the cadets. Kaori's projections are great, but they don't come close to capturing how menacing, how petrifying they are up close. Or how many teeth they

have.

"Relax," Xaden whispers. "It's not going to scorch you."

Like that's supposed to comfort me?

"How the fuck would you know?" I reply just as quietly.

The cadets turn as a group to face the red, and the first fool draws a sword.

"We're supposed to approach from the right!" the girl insists, darting to the right.

No, no. Reds prefer the left.

The dragon tracks the movement, then lifts a single claw and smashes the cadet straight into the ground with a nauseating series of crunching sounds.

Oh, *fuck*.

"Stupid," Xaden whispers, but he doesn't move.

We should warn them about being in a group. Even if they hate us for existing, it's the right thing to do. I open my mouth—

"Desi!" the guy with the sword shouts.

The dragon curls its tongue, and fire erupts from its mouth, streaming out in a flow that reminds me of lava. The cadets don't even have time to scream before they're cremated. Smoke drifts from the vicinity of where they stood as the dragon huffs once, then turns west.

Just like that, four cadets are *dead*.

"And that's why you don't approach in groups," Xaden says. "Norwood will sleep easier tonight."

I take a single step beyond the tree and watch the scorpiontail depart.

"Let's go."

"What if it's mine?" I continue watching the red flick its tail.

"It's not," he says with such certainty that I turn back to face him, lifting my brows.

"According to whom?"

"Sgaeyl." He pushes off the tree and strides right past me. "Come on, Cuir is waiting for you."

"Cuir?" I repeat like a fucking bird, chasing after my cousin. My mind races through the list of willing dragons. "Green Swordtail?"

"Yes," he says as I catch up. "Sgaeyl says Cuir is waiting for you in a field to the south."

Too many emotions flood my body to catalog them all, but I register the burst of joy that I've been chosen and an inexplicable pang of…something…that I'm being told. "What, like Sgaeyl chose my dragon for me?"

Xaden scoffs. "She's not one to play matchmaker. She's just conveying the information."

"That's not normal." My hands fist at my sides.

"This"—Xaden gestures to the rebellion relic on his left arm—"makes everything out here abnormal when it comes to us. I can't explain it."

"I think you can." I keep up with him, only because I know he'll leave me behind if I try to prove a point by stopping and waiting for an answer he obviously doesn't want to give. There is no match in the world for his stubbornness, except for maybe Sgaeyl. "You are the only family I have left. You're closer to a brother than you are a cousin. So fucking tell me."

He glances my way as we approach the field, then nods. "There's a chance that the dragons willing to fight this war with us are seeking out riders with rebellion relics."

"Of course they're willing to fight Poromiel, otherwise they wouldn't bond—" My words die. "Oh. You mean…"

"Yes."

My chest draws tight. "Are you saying the choices are already made for us?" Gods, is everything about my life decided by other fucking people?

"It's just a theory," he says quickly, his gaze darting toward mine. "Sgaeyl told me about Cuir because she knows I worry—" He grimaces. "That's not true. Sometimes I think she relishes in me worrying. She knows I won't leave the forest until you bond, and Garrick and I have somewhere we need to be." He throws up a finger. "I will tell you about *that* after you bond."

"One day your inability to be entirely truthful with someone is going to bite you in the ass."

"Doubtful. My ability to keep secrets keeps people alive." The

leaves rustle on a sulfur-scented wind. “But I will tell you I’m going to need your help.”

My chest swells with a sense of purpose, and I nod. “I’ll do whatever you need.”

“I know.” We share a look and continue toward the field where my future waits.

I almost never get to see him alone anymore, especially with the addendum in place, so I take advantage of the situation. “Are you going to see Cat? Is that where you have to be?”

“Fuck no.” He grimaces. “I spend as little time with her as possible. It’s not worth the trip when all we do is annoy the shit out of each other. I don’t know how much longer…” He rips his hand over his hair. “It doesn’t matter.”

“You deserve to be happy,” I say quietly, and somehow it feels like the loudest thing I could have said in a forest full of dragons.

“What is this elusive happiness of which you speak?” He scans the forest around us, ever on guard.

“I think it’s love.” I nod to myself. “Like what my parents had. Love and family and a future beyond all the misery—or at least someone who makes the misery worth it.”

“I like that for you.”

“I like that for *you*, too.” My hands curl into fists again. “I hate that you’re betrothed to someone you won’t have that with. Hate that you had no say in the matter. Most days I wake up just wishing it would all…stop.”

“The betrothal?” His brow furrows.

“The wars. The fighting. The powerlessness, including your betrothal.”

“You don’t need to worry about me, Bodhi.” He drapes his arm over my shoulder. “I’m the one who’s responsible for you, remember?”

“All I do is worry about you,” I blurt. “You think I don’t see what this place is turning you into? I barely recognized you when I showed up in July. You hardly ever smile anymore. You almost *never* laugh. I’ve seen you kill on the mat when a knockout would have sufficed, and you didn’t warn those first-years that the red was going

to bake them because they were in a group. You should break the betrothal. Fuck whatever agreement Uncle Fen made. I'll back you with the council. You know I'll do it. I'll keep my word."

Durrans always keep their word. Dad's voice slides through my memory.

"I know you will. It's not the betrothal changing me." Xaden squeezes me once in a half hug, then drops his arm. "And does it really matter what I become if it means you're safe? Garrick? Liam? Imogen? Sloane? Soleil—"

"You don't have to list every marked one," I counter as we approach the line of trees surrounding the field. "I get the point."

"You don't." He pauses, then pins me in place with a look that instills fear in most of the quadrant. "But you will. Because you didn't warn those cadets, either. Not that I give a shit, but I'm bound by Codex not to interfere, so what's your excuse?"

My mouth snaps shut. A pit hollows my stomach because he's right, even if I don't want to admit it. I could have stepped out and said something to those cadets.

He looks up to the sky, takes a long breath, and then looks at me again. "This place changes *everyone*, including you."

"We can choose not to let it," I whisper.

"If we don't change, we die." His expression softens into something akin to pity.

"What would our parents think?" My pulse pounds as I turn away from my cousin and walk into the field.

"Our parents would think those cadets had already been warned by Kaori, and it was their choice not to listen to guidance. We can't save everyone, Bodhi," Xaden calls after me.

A big Blue Clubtail that isn't on Kaori's list waits in the center of the field, standing at its full height. Its claws flex on the ground and, above a scar that bisects its snout, its golden eyes narrow on me.

"Bodhi—" Xaden's words die from the edge of the field behind me. "Oh, fuck. Not that one."

It's not the green I've been *told* I'm going to bond.

Fuck it. I'm done having my choices made for me. I may not be a Riorson by name, but I am by blood, and I can handle a blue. I

break into a full sprint, my arms pumping as my feet devour the distance across the field.

"Bodhi!" Xaden shouts. "No!"

Three things seem to happen all at once.

The blue lowers its head and opens its enormous jaw, tongue curling, fire welling in the back of its throat. Shadows rush the ground in front of me. And I realize I may have just made the biggest mistake of my life and am about to pay for it.

I throw out my arms in front of me like they have a chance of saving me from the impending inferno, and my mother's face flashes in my mind.

This is bigger than any one *of us, Bodhi.* She held me so tight, as if she could squeeze a lifetime of love into me if she tried hard enough. *If we stand by while evil consumes the most innocent of us, we will deserve what happens when it reaches our own doors. Stay close to Xaden. He'll protect you, and you'll keep him in balance. You need each other.*

I close my eyes as the fire roars in my direction, remembering the scent of lilacs, her perfume, the last kiss she pressed onto my forehead before walking into battle with my father. I may meet Malek, but I'll get to see my parents, too. Heat kisses my face.

Forgive me, Xaden. He risked everything, gave everything, and I threw it away.

A vise squeezes my ribs, and I'm yanked off my feet as death comes for me. Wind rushes and heat blasts beneath me, rising quickly.

My eyes fly open and the air in my lungs gushes out. The ground falls away, and the fireball dissipates as I'm pulled higher and higher into the sky, held between two immovable green talons.

Cuir.

"I know what agency means to you, what has been taken from you." A light, mellow male voice cuts into me, and a feeling like home clicks into place. *"I will always give you a choice."*

Holy shit, I'm not dead. I throw my arms over the talon that's curved around my torso and hold tight.

"But I will not always respect or accept that choice," he warns as

we soar. *"So choose now, Bodhi Durran. You may climb and accept this bond, or you may fall to a swift reunion with the parents you miss so dearly."*

What the fuck was I thinking, charging after a dragon who hadn't instigated a bond?

"I will not hold blame over you for your misstep, but I will not tolerate a rejection, so decide. Now." His tone is at complete odds with his words.

"I'll climb!" I shove up on his talon, and he loosens it just enough for me to heave myself onto the top of his claw. He leaves it level, giving me a platform to steady my feet as I grab for the top of the first scale.

"You have until the time we reach the others."

Nothing like a deadline to get me moving faster. This is completely different from the Gauntlet, is nothing they prepared us for, but I'm excellent at adjusting when things don't go my way. Scale by scale, I climb Cuir's leg, fighting the wind and gravity as he takes us toward the flight field.

"Why me?" I shout into the wind as I approach the knob of his shoulder, fighting every instinct to stare up at his wings with wonder.

"Because you seek power to end harm, instead of the means for victory." He tucks his forelegs underneath him, and I'm left dangling hundreds of feet above the ground. *"And that is a unique quality among riders."*

Digging my fingers into the back edge of his scales, I pull myself up with excruciating slowness. The muscles of my shoulders, arms, chest all scream in protest, but I make it. My toes gain leverage on the bottom of his shoulder, and I scramble the rest of the way to the top, gasping for breath.

He banks left, and my body weight drags me across the base of his neck.

"You could make this easier!" I call out, throwing myself flat against his spine so I don't fly right off the other side of him.

"You could have not tried to bond another dragon."

Fair point. I move toward the seat, using a motion that's far more slithering than it could be called crawling. My patches catch on his

scales as I pull myself forward, then slide over the hard lump of pommel scale.

"Your climbing skills are superior to your reasoning skills," Cuir lectures. He levels out, and I tuck my knees underneath me to turn in the seat.

"I know." I settle into position and notice the dark smears on the pommel scales. Locking my thighs, I lift my hands, and pain rips up my arms as I notice I've torn bleeding holes in the tips of my fingers from the climb.

"I surmise it will not be the last time you bleed from my back if you prove as reckless as you've demonstrated today. And to think I waited to bond again until this year for you."

From the look of our approach, I've gained my seat just in time for his deadline. We'll make it back to the flight field in the next few minutes. I can already see the dragons lined up on the edge of the hill to watch and the others flying at various altitudes around us.

"I'm not reck—" I stop myself before I lie. "I'll work on it."

"See that you do. My choices are now tied to yours." He begins the descent to the flight field, and it hits me in full for the first time.

He's really chosen me.

Out of every rider in the valley, I'm his selection.

He could have bonded last year. He could have chosen Xaden like everyone does.

"I will choose you every day until your death or your demise," Cuir says.

Aren't those the same things? I swallow the swelling knot of emotion in my throat. "I'll choose you over everyone." It's a promise I don't take lightly. "Durrans don't break their word." I grin, thinking of my father. Then I throw my head back to the sun as Cuir and I cut through the sky. I can keep both promises I've made to my parents. I'm a rider now. I'll never be powerless again.

"Remember that vow." He banks right, and this time, I shift my weight and we move together seamlessly. *"I will hold you to it."*

For the rest of my life.



632 AU
Glane—Orange Daggertail
(Female) Descended from the Fhaicorain Line
Estimated Age: 19
Recorded Riders: 0

—The Compendium of Dragonkind,
last updated by Colonel Valin Kaori



Imogen

Leaves crunch under my boots as I walk into the forest, having been dismissed after Bodhi's less-than-rousing motivational speech that did nothing to improve my perpetually foul disposition. I sincerely hope some Navarrian asshole tries to exact revenge on me out here,

because I'm in the mood to kill some people.

Fuck this day.

Fuck this kingdom.

Fuck everyone who put us in this godsforsaken torture chamber disguised as a war college.

I flinch. I can't say that about Riorson. He made the only choice he could to save our lives after Navarre took those of our parents. He's the only reason we're still breathing, and I owe him my unflinching loyalty until one of us meets Malek.

Fuck General Sorrengail for making the deal.

Yeah. That's better.

I stride between trees with zero trepidation, more than ready to meet my fate like my mother and sister did, or at least what I thought would be my fate until Kaori projected a certain Orange Daggertail in the middle of our classroom a few weeks ago.

An Orange Daggertail that should be dead.

"Where the hell are you?" I whisper, knowing damn well she can hear me. She's hovered close enough to my mind since Presentation that I could even switch to a mental pathway for communication at this point if I didn't feel like I deserve some answers first. Which I do.

Especially since I went to bed after Presentation with a shimmering new relic of an Orange Daggertail winding around my left hip, a fact I'm keeping to myself. It's a claiming mark, the place where magic enters our body once channeled from our dragon, but surely there's a way to reject it if she turns out to be the giant pain in the ass I think she might be. How did I not notice her in the line of dragons? How did she put it there so painlessly? The only other relic I've been given hurt like hell.

"Have you always been this disagreeable?" she asks, invading my head with a voice so sweet it borders on sugar. If sugar were poisonous.

Like you're not? She might be the most ill-tempered, impetuous dragon on the Continent.

"I heard that."

Stop listening unless you're ready to show yourself.

She scoffs, the sound tickling my brain, but she's nowhere to be seen under the canopy of brilliant fall colors.

"Katrina, please watch over Quinn," I whisper into the ether at my deceased sister.

I need to hurry. Bodhi threw off the plan I made with Quinn to tackle this day together, and I'll never forgive myself if something happens to the annoyingly perky blonde before I get to the meeting place we hurriedly designated.

"End your friendship with the Navarrian and perhaps I'll let you fly out of this valley."

She's not like the others. And you don't determine my friends. My stomach tenses.

"We'll see about that."

A high-pitched shriek sounds from somewhere to the east, and I wince.

By Dunne, if I have to die, I won't squeal like a pig when Malek comes for me.

Something flutters down in front of me, and I whip my hand out to catch a deep-magenta leaf with five points. "Look at that. It's your favorite color, Mom." I hold it out so she can see it from wherever she's watching.

My mom and sister may have been executed in Calldyr, but they never feel far from me.

Gods, I've missed falls like this. Trees in Tyrrendor are predominantly coniferous; at least they were where I was fostered near Lewellen. But at home, in Deaconshire Province, we have trees like some of these that drop their leaves when autumn calls. It doesn't matter how many years have passed or how much I used to love Aretia, I always think of Hardincourt as home.

"Remind you of the trees at Hardincourt?"

My head snaps up as Garrick Tavis, two swords strapped to his back, steps out from behind a tree and plants his gigantic feet in the middle of the path. I narrow my eyes and remind my heart to settle the fuck down. He might look good enough to devour with one bite, but I'm not going there. Not now. Not ever.

There are plenty of other men to have a few flings with at

Basgiath.

Everyone who gets close to me winds up dead. Dad. Mom. My sister, Katrina. Elyse—the only friend I made that first year being fostered at Ivyndelle. It doesn't matter how mad I am at him, I'll be damned if Garrick winds up on that list.

With his enormous build, agonizingly beautiful face, square chin, and unbeatable skills on the mat, it's not like he's having any trouble finding women to warm his bed. Unfortunately—but good for Garrick—I'm not the only one who gets incredibly turned on by performances of lethal prowess around here. There's definitely something wrong with everyone who crosses the parapet.

Ugh. Remembering Sharla Gunter crawling all over him in the dormitory hallway last night makes me want to vomit.

"What are you doing here?" I snap, discarding my pretty magenta leaf.

Fuck. I swore to myself I wasn't going to say a single word to him for the two years we'd have to cohabitate in this place, and I've just blown seventy-eight days of restraint.

"Observing like a good squad leader."

He grins and, *fuck me*, that dimple pops in his left cheek. Navarrians might be the bane of my existence, but that dimple is going to end me.

"So you *do* know how to speak to me. I was starting to wonder."

I blatantly ignore his comment. "You're not *my* squad leader, so fuck off to wherever else you can watch over a first-year who might appreciate your presence." I give him a good glare. "I'm just fine on my own."

"Being nicer to the object of your desire might give you a better outcome."

Fuck all the way off or show up. I double down on my glare and tug a strand of pink hair out of my eyes when it gets in the way.

"You appreciate my presence," he says, completely unfazed as usual. Then he picks up the magenta leaf and twirls it by the stem as he walks beside me. Hard to believe the man handles giant swords with the same hands, that he could handle me—

Nope. That's a thought I'm not indulging.

I have never let Garrick Tavis put his hands on me, and I'm not about to start.

"And this reminds you of home. Admit it." He looks my way, and I studiously avoid his gaze. He knows me with frightening depth, and I don't have the energy for him today.

I glance sideways at the leaf, then shrug a single shoulder. "Maybe." It's easier to admit to one of his statements than the other.

"It's all right to miss it."

"Thank you for your permission." I pick up the pace, and he easily keeps up with those long legs of his.

He laughs. "Swear to the gods, you have the patience of a saint for every marked one but me. Why is that, Imogen?"

The sound of my name on his lips threatens to turn my stomach gooey, so I shut that down immediately. "Because I don't like you."

"Now, now. There's no reason to lie." He grins, and that dimple pops again.

"Is it that hard to believe a woman is immune to your charms?" I keep my gaze forward, scanning the forest around us for the fire-breathing dragons that are supposed to be wandering about.

"You think I'm charming?" His grin widens, and I roll my eyes. He's had a masochistic tolerance for my unreasonable level of bullshit since the day I clocked him in the face when I was eight, which I've yet to understand.

Katrina tried her damnedest to force me to apologize.

I never did—because fuck him, trying to tell me which of my own horses I should ride when he was a guest at *my* house. Little did we know our parents' friendship would draw my family into a rebellion seven years later.

"I didn't say that." I spot the sprawling oak Mom described about a hundred yards away and send up a prayer to Dunne that Quinn found it. It's the only one in the forest that was split in half by a lightning strike ages ago, back when we'd had an actual lightning wielder in our ranks.

"You haven't said *anything* to me since you crossed the parapet." His smile fades as he tucks the leaf into his uniform pocket.

"Yes, why haven't you spoken to him? Such a nice Tyrrish boy."

I mentally push at the pumpkin-orange threads of a bond forming at the edge of my mind, hoping the gossamer filaments will disperse. *You don't get to bond me until you explain some things*.

"I will do as I please," she snaps. *"I am a proven slayer, with a kill count in the* thousands*—"*

Blah. Blah. I push at the bond again, trying to picture a mental wall going up. Gods, Mom and Katrina spent so much time trying to teach me, to prepare me, and I'd only listened to a fraction of what they were saying, certain that I wasn't going to volunteer for the quadrant.

"Imogen." Garrick knows better than to touch me, so he pivots, putting himself directly in my path, forcing me to stop. "Why aren't you talking to me?"

"What do you call this?" I gesture between us, then step left.

He matches the move. "I call this begging Riorson—"

I step right, and he's already there.

"—to assign me to you so I have an excuse to talk to you."

He's involved Riorson? Fucking great. That's not embarrassing or anything. I go left again, and he does the same.

"Look, if you want to dance with me, just ask." He smiles, and I make the mistake of looking up into his eyes. I have to arch my neck with how much he's grown, but the second I do, I'm wholly, completely *fucked.*

Garrick has too many outstanding qualities to list, but his eyes? Those are in a category all of their own. The hazel depths stare down at me, holding me prisoner without setting a single finger to my skin. The black of his uniform and hair somehow accentuate the copper that rings his pupils, but the rest of his irises vary between green and blue in a pattern I've never been able to decipher. And worse, I know from experience that they change with whatever he wears, constantly drawing my attention to see what they might look like on any given day.

If they'd stay the same, I'd have a prayer of conquering the addiction.

"Would you like me to fly over and slice that sexual tension for you?"

Ugh. I snap my eyes closed. *Get out of my head.*

"No. You are mine. Get used to it."

"I'll be happy to oblige," Garrick says with a wicked grin.

I blink. What were we discussing?

"Dancing," she reminds me, and the bond strengthens.

"No thank you." I lift both my brows so he knows I'm serious. "From what I've seen the last few months, you have all the dance partners you can handle."

"Is that why you won't talk to me?" His eyes flare and his grin deepens. "Because you're jealous?"

Jealous? Fuck that nonsense.

Wait. Is that seriously…*hope* shining in his eyes?

"Hardly." I fold my arms across my chest. "I couldn't care less where you put your dick. I'm not the one riding it."

He leans into my space, and his gaze drops to my mouth. "Say the word, Imogen."

Gods, that gooey sensation invades my stomach again, and I find myself staring at the perfectly carved curves he calls lips.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." The lie rolls off my tongue easily. I take a single step backward, then curse at myself for revealing how to make me retreat. I've spent the majority of my life proving to him that I have no weaknesses, and if he knew he's the only cause of such a flaw, I'd be screwed.

And somehow, he'd wind up dead.

Not sure what I did to piss off Malek, but I have no doubt he'd take Garrick, too.

"Say the word and I won't so much as look at another woman." His gaze meets mine, and I'm trapped again. "Ever."

He's too close. Smells too good. And I'd rather see him bed a thousand women than be responsible for burying him.

"Don't swear yourself to celibacy for my sake." I tilt my head and pout. "It would be a really lonely life." I let the sweet sarcasm drip from my tone.

He scoffs. "Gods, you really are pissed at me."

"I'm starting to think this qualifies as interference and not observation." I put my hands on my hips.

His sigh could blow half the leaves out of this forest. "You're looking for Glane. Orange Daggertail."

I blink. "I'm not."

"You are." He shrugs. "Chradh told me. Sgaeyl told Riorson. I'd consider the two of them fairly reliable sources, considering they rarely agree on anything."

"I'm growing bored. Let's move things along."

Energy zips down my spine, and I roll my shoulders to shake off the odd sensation.

What the fuck was that? My frustration reaches a boiling point with *everything* about this day, and I take another step backward. He hasn't moved, and yet he's still consuming all the breathable oxygen in my vicinity. When did he get so gigantic? He'd bordered on gangly the last time I saw him. "Did you start eating full cows when you crossed the parapet or something? You were never this big, and now you're…" I wave my hand toward his torso. "Everywhere. Are you as tall as Riorson now?"

"So you noticed. Interesting." A corner of his mouth rises. "I have about an inch on him, but don't bring it up. It's a sore subject."

"Boys are so weird." I move to the left, and this time he lets me pass.

"You can run away from me all you want. I'm used to you denying this. But Glane is the dragon coming for you. I doubt she'll let you outrun her," he says, walking after me as I head toward the dead oak.

"He's right."

Shut up. I'll deal with you in a minute.

"Me run away from you?" I whirl around and throw up a finger, effectively stopping the biggest guy in the quadrant from taking another step. "You're the one who didn't bother to say goodbye."

Fuck me, I should not have said that.

His eyes widen. "Is *that* why you're giving me the silent treatment?"

"How is any of this silent?" I take a full breath and will my temper to cool, for the interminable rage that lives within me to ease off just a little.

"I couldn't get to Ivyndelle those last months before Parapet." His shoulders fall.

"It's an *hour's* ride from Lewellen." Heat flushes up my back and spreads through my limbs like my anger is a living, breathing thing determined to take over my nervous system.

"You think I didn't want to?" His hands flex in front of him like he's struggling not to reach for me. "Your foster family were loyalists, and they started to quietly accuse the Duke of Lewellen of being disloyal to Navarre when he's the one who represents Tyrrendor in the Senarium. They wouldn't allow him to bring me with him for a quarterly well-being check. They said marked ones shouldn't congregate."

"You think I don't know that?" I shout as the heat within me starts to burn. "Do you know how many of us were fostered alone?"

"Three," he answers quietly.

"Three." I nod as the burn starts to consume me. "Me. Sloane. Julianne. The rest of you were all paired up. Liam and Xaden. Bodhi and Merielle. You and—"

"Tyce," Garrick finishes for me. "I know."

"And sure, he's seven years younger than you are, but at least you had someone. Maybe we weren't friends, but you were the only marked one I saw for three years, and you just…left." Why the hell am I even saying any of this? My mouth snaps shut, and I would give *anything* to take it all back, to reach into his head and remove the last thirty seconds—hell, the last ten minutes from his mind.

He can't know that anyone has the power to hurt me, let alone him.

"Imogen, I'm so sorry." He reaches for me, and I retreat with a quickness. "It wasn't by choice. I would never consciously do anything that would hurt you."

He doesn't even have to try. The result is the same.

"Enough of this. Are you willing to bond me?"

Absolutely, if it gets me out of this situation.

"Excellent choice." Her voice is edged with menacing glee.

The first ripple of boiling energy hits, and I fall to my knees, gasping for air. Then it overpowers me again and again in waves so

close, I can't feel my own heartbeat through the pain. Heat burns me alive from the inside out without sign of respite, and there is no end to the fire. It's going to kill me. There's no way to survive the pressure trying to pop my head open or the flames devouring me one bone at a time.

"Imogen?" Garrick crouches beside me.

"Don't touch me!" He'll catch fire as surely as I am. An indescribable force fills my ribs, then expands, rearranging everything within me as it consumes the fibers of my being. Molten power incinerates whatever I used to be and forges something entirely new. Every breath feels hotter than the last, as if I'm inhaling pure, unfettered energy—

Glane.

"She's channeling," I manage to say between sharp, heaving breaths, my fingernails cutting into my palms.

"Not possible." Garrick shakes his head, putting his face right in front of mine. At least he'll be the last thing I see. "You haven't flown yet."

"She is!" I scream, becoming just another bellowing voice in a forest full of death.

"Breathe," he orders in a booming voice I've only heard him use on his squad. "It's going to pass, I promise, but you have to breathe."

I focus on his eyes and pull in one scorching breath after another, trying to remember what Mom and Katrina told me about this.

Ground.

"I have to ground." I close my eyes and focus on the foyer of my childhood home at Hardincourt. The paintings on the wall. The flight jackets hanging by the door. The sun-bleached hardwood floor. I picture it all so vividly in my mind that I can almost smell bread baking in the kitchen. Then I turn toward the front door, where orange, smelted power flows into my sanctuary, and mentally kick the thing closed.

Power rushes by the windows, filling the panes, but it doesn't bust through.

I take my first painless breath and open my eyes to find Garrick

watching me, his eyes wide and mouth agape. Rage boils over anew. "I'm going to kill her."

"How in Malek's name did you know how to ground?" His hands hover near my face, but he doesn't make contact.

I slowly rise to my feet, testing to make sure I didn't lose any limbs in that excruciating little ritual. My body is no worse for wear if I don't count the tiny, bloody cut on my palm from my own fingernail. "Because unlike the vast majority of marked ones, I'm a third-generation legacy rider."

"Your mom taught you." He nods solemnly and stands.

"And Katrina." I turn away from him and stalk toward the giant dead oak and the field just beyond it. Power hums in my veins, roams under my skin, simultaneously discombobulating and yet the most natural thing in the world. "You delivered your message. Now go."

I am as I was always meant to be.

"I'm not walking off after you just went through that," Garrick argues, following behind me.

"You are mine." She sounds awfully pleased with herself.

"I am pissed." I use the mental pathway that links us.

"You'll get over it."

Once I'm about ten feet away, I catch sight of Quinn hanging from the lowest branch, her blue-streaked blond curls blowing in the breeze, and my shoulders immediately sag with relief. I never wanted to care about my bubbly little year-mate, but she has a way of wearing down even the most surly person. That being me.

Plus, she declared that we'd be friends immediately after seeing my rebellion relic and never once questioned her decision. Now I just have to make sure the trend of dying once close to me never catches up to her.

"Gen! You made it!" Quinn drops from the branch, her labrys axe strapped to her back. Her face falls as I approach. "Are you all right?"

"Fine." I nod.

Her eyes narrow over my shoulder. "What did you do?"

"Me?" Garrick throws his hands up. "I didn't touch her."

"Oh, I can tell." Quinn glowers at him. "I'm so glad I'm into girls. You men are all drama."

"Unbelievable." Garrick gawks at her and leans back against the tree.

Movement in the field catches my eye, and my focus jumps to the pumpkin-orange daggertail prowling our way. Those horns, that sneer, the pattern of her chest scales…it's most definitely her.

"We're about to have words!" I shout at her, lifting my finger.

"Oh gods, Gen, you can't just yell at a dragon," Quinn mutters, lowering her eyes like Kaori taught us. "Let alone an orange one."

"Navarrian!" she bellows, and that's the only warning before she peels her lips off her teeth and hisses out a narrow stream of fire between her fangs, aimed straight at Quinn.

My stomach drops straight out of my body.

"No!" I lunge for Quinn and hurl us both behind the massive tree trunk. Power erupts through me in a torrent of heat, and I throw my mental front door shut again. The last thing we need is for me to burn out while being burned alive.

Fire streams past as the three of us huddle behind the oak.

It ends as suddenly as it began, but my anger is just getting started.

"Good thing this tree was petrified," Garrick says, knocking on the trunk.

"You better have known that!" I yell at *Glane*, leaving Garrick and Quinn behind the oak as I surge into the field.

"Did you die? No. Cease whining."

"She is my best friend. My only friend!"

"Her kind killed your mother. Your sister." She lowers her head into a battle position, slithering it like a snake.

"She had nothing to do with it! Just like I had nothing to do with the rebellion!" I charge straight up to her nose, pointing my finger at her. *"And so help me Dunne, if you touch one hair on her head, I'll tell everyone who you really are."*

She lifts her orange head and narrows her eyes. *"I am Glane."*

I snort. *"You think I don't remember you? It's hard to forget the first dragon your grandmother introduced you to, even if you were*

five."

"I am only twenty." Steam billows from her nostrils. *"Perhaps you remember incorrectly."*

"Perhaps you're full of shit." I fold my arms. *"You bonded me, even knowing it's forbidden. Kaori will know."*

"I am recorded as Glane to all." She tilts her head down at me, making me feel like I'm five all over again. *"Including you."*

How the hell did she pull that off? Kaori's predecessor must have kept shitty records.

"You want me to call you Glane?" I drum my fingers on my arm.

"You must." She breathes steam over me, but I don't so much as flinch. *"You are lucky to be mine. My kill count—"*

"Is zero, Glane*."* I arch an eyebrow at her.

She growls low in her throat.

I bare my teeth at her.

"Mature." She huffs.

"You're one to speak." I glance over my shoulder to be sure Quinn hasn't spontaneously burst into flames or anything.

She gives me an encouraging wave and giant grin.

"I suppose you are my elder," Glane says, flexing her talons.

I scoff. *"You leave her alone and I'll keep your secret."*

"I'll do one better." Her head swivels southward, and a Green Scorpiontail walks out of the forest.

"Cruth!" Quinn shouts, then takes off running across the field with her arms open like some kind of fictional heroine who's about to be reunited with a long-lost love.

My mouth curves into a smile as I shake my head. Of course it's just that easy for her. I'm glad it is.

"Let's go."

"Imogen," Garrick calls out. "We'll talk at the flight field. Our conversation isn't over."

I cringe. "Oh, but it is!" I take off at a run, mounting with ease. The motions are second nature, the product of having been trained since childhood. Her scales shine in the sunlight as I find the seat and settle into position. *"I should warn you, I have every intention of dying in combat."*

"As do I." Glane takes three steps and launches us skyward with great beats of her translucent wings. *"In that, we are matched."*

Wind rushes through my hair as I look down at the field, leaving Garrick behind. *"I bet I'll kill more of the enemy than you will."*

"Challenge accepted."

I throw out my arms and let my head fall back to embrace the sun as we climb, headed for the flight field. "I made it," I tell Katrina and Mom. "Just like you said I would." A smile curves my mouth. "Tell Grandma I took her dragon." More accurately, her dragon took *me.*

My body curves over Glane's spine, and we head toward the flight field, sharing a secret that would destroy Kaori's faith in the Empyrean.

But it restores *mine*.

PLEASE NOTE:

THE REST OF THE STORIES IN THIS COLLECTION CONTAIN SPOILERS FOR *FOURTH WING*.



633 AU
Feirge—Green Daggertail
(Female) Descended from the Uaineloidsig Line
Estimated Age: 87
Recorded Riders: 3

—The Compendium of Dragonkind,
last updated by Colonel Valin Kaori



Rhiannon

"Come find me."

First-years scatter into the forest around me, disappearing behind trees until I'm trekking southward entirely on my own. It's hard to believe Threshing is finally here, but I'm more than prepared. I'm

jubilant, incapable of keeping a smile off my face or containing the excitement that has me practically vibrating with anticipation. Wish I could say the same for my friends.

Most of them are a mess.

Both Tara and Trina seemed all right, but Ridoc hurled his breakfast before we split up, Violet was even paler than usual, and Sawyer was so deep in his own head that I'm worried he might get passed over again. I wish dragons chose their riders in groups instead of individually so we could have all stayed together. If Kaori has been consistent with one message, it's that we're on our own out here.

My heart beats at the wing speed of a hummingbird as I head into the woods with a light step, willing my pulse to slow so I can think clearly. It does me no good to be excited if I stumble onto a cantankerous red and get myself turned into a bonfire. I did not cross the parapet in the rain with Violet's borrowed boot just to become a scorch mark.

"Come find me." The voice is feminine and clear as a bell, though it falls short of being called sweet. Kaori told us to listen to the call if we heard it, and though I hadn't told any of my friends, I instantly knew what he was talking about.

I woke this morning with a flash of memory of the jade-green daggertail I'd seen at Presentation, that single command in my head, and a deeply rooted ache radiating from the center of my chest that felt as though someone had snatched a piece of my lungs while I slept. Even now, it stings slightly with every breath, like those early winter mornings when I'd ventured outside of our family's house for firewood so my twin could sleep a little longer.

My heart twinges. Raegan should be having her first baby around winter solstice, and I can't even receive a letter to hear how she's doing until I complete my first year. Gods, I'd give anything to bring her here for even just a few minutes so she could share this exhilaration that has my nervous system crackling. She'd love it! I'd get her out before a dragon could get anywhere close to her, of course. I'd rather die than risk any harm to my sister.

"Come find me."

"I'm trying," I whisper to the breeze.

Someone screams from my left, and my stomach pitches. I can't see much through the bright autumn leaves covering the massive trees, but that plume of smoke peeking between the branches can't be good.

It's no one you know. Stay focused.

Or better yet, maybe it's Jack Barlowe. That asshole deserves to be torched at first sight for the way he bullies everyone around him, especially Violet. But dragons seem to find that sort of callousness attractive, so he's probably surrounded by a bevy of interested snouts. Gods help us if he becomes the most powerful of our year.

Something tugs at my chest, pulling me north, and I follow, turning my back on the smoke and heading into the denser grouping of trees. The shade engulfs me, bringing a chill. It's illogical to think a dragon could fit between these trees, but listening to Kaori has gotten me this far, so I follow the sensation and hope it's the jade-green daggertail pulling me closer.

A green would be *outstanding*. They have a more stable connection to magic, and I appreciate how rational they're known to be. Given the moodiness of everyone around me, I could definitely use someone in my life who's emotionally stable. But I don't want just *any* green. I want the one who chose not to turn Violet into a pile of cinders during Presentation because it recognized the scales in the armor she wears as belonging to her sister's dragon.

I'll spend the rest of my life thanking that dragon for not torching my best friend.

Sulfur scents the breeze, and my steps slow as I approach a small stream, apprehension seizing control of my heart for the first time today. I rein in the unease quickly, utterly rejecting the possibility that this might not be the best day of my life.

I'm here to find her.

The sun caresses my face as I walk out of the thicket, but any notion of comfort disappears with the muffled cry coming from the center of the clearing, where two riders are crouched. Scratch that. One of them is lying down while the other hovers.

"Oh, shit." My feet falter at the edge of the open area that isn't

quite big enough to be called a meadow. There's no visible scorch mark, but the trees on the left side are on fire. No wonder I smelled sulfur.

The crouching rider whips in my direction as she jolts to her feet, brandishing a hatchet and an expression more menacing than any dragon I've encountered—with the exception of that Blue Daggertail Riorson is bonded to.

Sgaeyl is the stuff of nightmares.

"I'm not a threat." I throw my hands back at chest level, exposing my palms but keeping my weapons within reach.

The brunette with two silver stars along her collarbone lifts a pierced eyebrow. "I wouldn't say that too loudly around here, Matthias. The Orange Daggertail who just melted your year-mate's face might come back."

Melted?

My heart attempts to vault out of my throat, and I rush forward with complete disregard for the hatchet and the rebellion relic that winds around the second-year's left arm. Dunne, don't let it be any of my squadmates—

The sight I find breaks my heart all the same.

A girl from Tara's squad lies on the ground, her eyes squeezed shut as she writhes in pain, and as much as I loathe the word "melted" when it comes to someone's face, in this instance, it's warranted. The entire right side of her face is red and blistered, and a strip of skin from her uniform collar to her scalp is just that… melted.

"Visia?" I drop to my knees beside her and grab ahold of her hand.

She squeezes back hard enough that her nails draw blood.

I hiss in pain, and Visia falls back, completely limp.

"Probably best she not be conscious for a bit," the second-year says, returning to a crouch as she places her hatchet into the holster at her belt. Her patches trigger my memory. Her name is Eya, and she's in first squad in my section. "That has to hurt like a bitch."

"What do I do?" I ask, grasping onto Visia's hand even though she's unconscious.

"You continue with Threshing." Eya looks over Visia with a sigh.

"Fuck that. I can't just leave her here." My head draws back. I'm nauseous just thinking about it.

"Keep that attitude." A wry smile twists Eya's mouth. "It will make you a front-runner for leadership next year."

"I'm concerned about Visia surviving *this* year."

"That's not up to you."

"This whole forest could catch fire." I glance up at the smoking branches.

Eya holds out a hand and looks toward the trees. Her arm rises, and water flows upward from the stream, dousing the trees with a hissing sound.

"That's impressive," I admit as the stream falls back into place with a flick of Eya's hand.

"Your argument is null and void. Now get—"

A low growl sounds from the right, and my stomach somersaults.

"Oh, shit," I whisper as the growling orange pokes its head through the trees, baring its teeth. My heart starts to pound, but I keep enough of my wits to lower my eyes immediately. "I'm guessing that's the one who melted Visia's face?"

"Yep," Eya responds, completely unbothered.

I stand slowly, wiping my bloody palm on my pants and keeping my gaze locked on the grass in front of the orange's lowered snout. Shit, the thing is in firing position and there's *maybe* twenty feet between us.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Eya rises behind me.

"She's vulnerable." My breath becomes choppy and the tugging sensation in my chest tries to pull me to the left, but I hold my ground. I'll never forgive myself if that dragon kills Visia because I'm afraid to stand up for her.

"I'm right next to her, you naive first-year," Eya lectures from behind me.

"And? Second- and third-years can only observe, not interfere," I argue as the orange blows my braids back with a foul-smelling breath of steam.

"Ugh," Eya gags, clearly getting a whiff of what I did. "Observing

close up is enough of a deterrent right now. I'm bonded. If that orange screws with me, it will have *my* dragon to deal with. What does Kaori tell you about powerful dragons?"

"The more powerful the dragon, the more powerful the rider's signet," I reply as the orange stalks forward a single step, lifting its head slightly. "Not sure now is the right time for a lesson."

The grass in front of the orange withers with its next breath.

"It's *always* the right time for a lesson around here," she counters. "It's not just the signet. The more powerful the dragon, the less other dragons are willing to fuck with its rider once the bond solidifies," she finishes. "I'm perfectly safe. You, however, are *not*."

My lips part. I never thought of it that way, but it makes complete sense.

The orange's head surges forward at the same moment that the trees to the left of us move. Before I can so much as blink, the dozen razor-sharp tips of a daggertail rest against the orange's exposed throat.

A jade-*green* daggertail.

My gaze flies along the daggertail's spine as the dragon maneuvers backward into the little clearing, holding its tail in place as it nimbly fills the space between the orange and us. It snarls in the orange's direction before swinging its head toward us.

With a single glimpse into her golden eyes, I forget to look away.

My heart stammers a staccato beat.

She's the call in my chest, the voice in my head. I'm as sure of it as I am my own name.

"Well, damn it," Eya mutters quietly as the orange retreats into the trees. "Lower your eyes, and remember not to—"

"Back down," I finish for her, taking a step toward the green. "I know. I studied. Don't worry. She's mine."

"You'd better be sure about that," Eya replies. "A green will absolutely know."

"You're mine*,"* the green corrects me.

"Isn't that what I said?" I take another step, putting me within an arm's reach of the green's snout.

"It is not the same." Her nostrils expand with her next inhale, and

then she draws her head back slightly, peering down at me. *"You coagulate quickly, Rhiannon. What an excellent sign. I am Feirge."*

"Feirge," I whisper, and that missing piece of my lungs clicks back into place.

"You would have known that had you sought the reference guide upon waking." It's a blatant admonishment.

My mouth opens, then shuts. She's called me out in the way that only Raegan does—blunt with no apology. "I meant to, but I needed to make sure my squadmates ate, since our squad leader is running around out here."

"Really? I had no idea. I've never seen any *of your memories."* She tilts her head.

Well, that can't be right. Dragons are privy to every memory the second they bond us.

"I've been calling for you since the dragon-watcher brought your aspirants to the forest. Your sense of direction leaves me awestruck." Her talons strike the grass one at a time like a schoolteacher drumming her fingertips to hide her exasperation.

A smile curves my lips. "Thank you."

She blinks.

"Oh." My eyebrows rise, and my smile vanishes as quickly as it formed. I had it right—she's exasperated. "You're being sarcastic." Of course she's seen my memories and knows what I was doing this morning. And she definitely isn't impressed with how long it has taken me to find her.

"How quickly you catch on."

"I didn't know dragons could be sarcastic," I mutter, staring up at her as she lifts her head, clearing a path to her foreleg should I choose to mount.

"Hopefully you'll be able to tell the difference when she *isn't*," Eya comments from behind me. "You'd better get going before she changes her mind."

Feirge resumes clacking her talons.

"Right." I take a step, then hesitate and glance back over my shoulder. "What about Visia?"

Eya looks at me as though I've sprouted another head. "What

about her? If she wakes before nightfall, it's up to her if she wants to continue, and if she doesn't, she'll be set back to next year in hopes a squad leader is willing to take her."

"Willing to take her?" My eyes widen. "You mean Aetos had to agree to take Sawyer?" Eya nods, and my mind races over my squadmates. Tynan's a dick, but the rest of us are solid. I choose to go with the odds. "When Visia wakes, tell her second squad understands the grit it takes to repeat, and she will be welcomed by whomever is designated to be our squad leader."

A smile slowly softens Eya's face. "I have a feeling that will be you."

My heart beats double-time as I rip my gaze from Eya's and turn back toward Feirge. A flicker of hope ignites in my chest, swiftly fanning into flames of determination as I look into her eyes. Squad leader. That's a hefty goal, and I'd have to be worthy—

"You approached without hesitation instead of cowering when your friend with Teine's scales was in danger during your Presentation. If you were not worthy, you'd be char by now." Feirge huffs a deep breath that feels like a giant dragon sigh. *"Should you doubt it, you have no place on my back."* There's zero sarcasm in her tone, and her talons still.

This is as serious as it gets.

"I'll trust your judgment." I study the distance to her foreleg and let the swelling anticipation I've felt since deciding to volunteer for the Riders Quadrant take over in the best possible way, giving in to the full thrill of the moment.

"Before or after I expire from waiting for you?"

I can't help the laugh that bursts through my lips.

"Oh, you're dramatic, too. Got it. Let's do this." I don't waste another second, pushing off the ground and breaking into a dead run toward her foreleg. My boots eat up the distance quickly, and I use the curve of the top of her claw just like the ramp in the Gauntlet.

Unlike the Gauntlet, halfway up her leg, I realize I don't have a prayer of reaching the top. Her leg is *huge*.

It feels like time slows as my momentum reaches its zenith, and

somehow, I know that if I fail this attempt, Feirge won't give me a second. Instead of watching Violet flail from the top of the Gauntlet, I'm suddenly the one who's about to struggle.

Violet. I need to take a page out of her book.

My weight begins to shift, and instead of thrusting a dagger into the wooden ramp like Violet did, I jab my hand into the small opening between Feirge's scales and use the leverage to haul myself up. It's harder than I expected, and I love every second.

I don't bother to pause to soak in the joy when I reach her shoulder. I head straight for the smooth dip of scales that makes up her seat and take my place. My hands grip the substantial ridges of her pommel, and I lock the toes of my boots into the gaps between her scales. There's a *click*ing sensation behind my ribs, like the final piece of a puzzle finding its home, and I relish the feeling. My grin threatens to split my face clean open.

Who wouldn't want to ride a dragon*?* That's what I said to Violet before we stepped onto the parapet, and I still mean every word of it. This is the pinnacle of my life. Now I just have to hold on.

"Don't worry. The flight is the easy part." She jumps skyward, launching with surprising ease for such a small space and heaving us upward with heavy beats of her wings.

By the first vertical dive, I fully comprehend the depth of her sarcasm while I search for my stomach.

I only vomit once before we land on the flight field.

So worth it.



633 AU
Sliseag—Red Swordtail
(Male) Descended from the Berradhdyr Line
Estimated Age: 73
Recorded Riders: 2

—The Compendium of Dragonkind,
last updated by Colonel Valin Kaori



Sawyer

I would rather die in this forest than repeat another year at Basgiath. Macabre but true. Even the love I carry for my parents isn't enough to keep me chained to this place for another godsforsaken year if I leave this forest unbonded again.

By the end of this day, I'll be a rider or a corpse. Period.

I just hope the people I've come to care about have better luck than I now expect from this place. Zihnal definitely shows his favoritism around here, and though he's never taken a shine to me, I pray he looks out for Rhi, Violet, Ridoc, and Trina. Kind of hope Tynan meets the pointy tip of a swordtail, though. Maybe that makes me a dick, but the last thing our kingdom needs is another bully with the ability to wield.

Statistically speaking, we aren't all coming home today, and that knowledge has me torn up like a battle-mangled sword. One of my edges is sharpened by the fury that I'm setting myself up for the humiliation of rejection again, but the other is chipped and jagged with the fear that I can't save my squadmates from the same fate. The tension of holding both emotions simultaneously is unbearable.

My ribs clamp down on my lungs as I watch my squadmates melt into the forest ahead of me, all carrying their own share of baggage. Well, except Rhi. That woman practically skips off to her fate with a shit-eating grin. I have zero doubt she'll be the first of us to bond. Confidence like hers is magnetic to everyone around her, but especially to dragons.

I lose sight of Ridoc, sharing one last look and a nod as we head off in separate directions among the trees. The usual golden undertones to his complexion are still leaning a little green, which I hate for him, but at least he's taking this seriously. The fact that he survived Presentation while running his mouth like usual is all that keeps me positive when it comes to his odds. Too fucking bad, because I really like him. In fact, he might be my favorite in our year. His ability to joke about everything balances out my inability to find damn near anything amusing. I've tried hard not to like *anyone*. It hurts too much when they die…or move on without me.

There isn't a single rider I still speak to from my squad last year. Maybe that's why they put us in new squads when we repeat, so we won't dwell in the misery of staring at the could-have-been of our own future every day in formation.

I tilt my head back to watch the riot of dragons as they fly overhead, and what patches of blue sky were there a moment

earlier are devoured by swaths of red, orange, brown, and green scales. The ground vibrates subtly as the dragons land within the forest, and the blue skies return, just like last year. But I'm not doing *anything* like I did it last year.

I try to shake off the heavy weight of foreboding that settles in my stomach while I head eastward, keeping to the perimeter of the forest. A couple of hours later, the sun is shining brightly overhead as I reach what has to be the southern edge. I haven't seen a single dragon.

Guess this tactic isn't a winner.

I turn toward the forest, blowing out a frustrated sigh and fighting to get a grip on my emotions, and walk along an enormous cluster of thorn-laden bushes. Dragons appreciate strength and stability, neither of which are qualities I'm feeling endowed with at the moment. Now, if a member of the Empyrean is looking for an agitated, overripe first-year repeat with a growing inferiority complex, I'm their guy.

Swear to Dunne, I need an emotional blacksmith to twist all these feelings back into the unbreakable weapon the quadrant expects them to be. Definitely shouldn't pray to Dunne about that, though, since she'd probably dismiss me on sight for not having my shit in order.

A hand reaches out of the brush and grabs my arm.

My heart stutters.

"What the—" I fling the hand off my arm and jump backward before drawing my sword.

"Oh, thank Zihnal, Sawyer!" Trina steps out of the bushes, twigs clinging to her red hair.

She has to be kidding me, right? It takes a couple of breaths to get my heart out of my fucking throat.

"That is an excellent way to get run through by a squadmate, Trina." I sheathe my sword.

"There are no squadmates today, remember?" Her brown eyes are wide as she studies our surroundings. "It's everyone for themselves."

"You're safe with me." I can't say the same for other cadets out

to settle grudges while our professors aren't looking. The dragons aren't the only ones with murderous intentions.

"I know. That's why I came out when I saw you." She gives me a tentative smile.

"How long have you been hiding in the bushes?" I lift my brows and pick one of the branches out of her hair. As squadmates go, I respect Trina. She's quiet, keeps to herself, and avoids the never-ending drama that comes with shoving a bunch of twentysomethings into the quadrant with minimal supervision.

"Maybe an hour?" She wrinkles her nose. "A brown stalked by, and I knew it wasn't mine, so I took cover."

"You do know you aren't going to bond if you spend the day hiding in the underbrush, right?" I snag the last branch out of her hair and drop it to the forest floor.

"*You* know you aren't going to bond if you don't even enter the forest, right?" she counters, folding her arms across her chest.

She's got me there. Heat stings my neck. I fucking *hate* that my skin flushes at the first sign of emotional distress. "I'm trying to do the exact opposite of what I did last year, since charging into the middle of the forest didn't exactly work out for me."

"How is it working for you this year?" She lifts her brows.

"It's…not." I shrug. "Obviously." Hopefully the others are having better luck, though if Trina and I are any measure of our squad, it's going to be a shit day.

"Well, we still have at least six hours until nightfall to turn that around," she says with an optimism I envy, her eyes lighting up. "I'm thinking we head into the forest together."

"We're not supposed to go in groups." I shove a hand into my hair, irritation with everything regarding today getting the best of me.

"Did you go in solo last year?" she asks.

Her tone is innocuous, but the words hit like a punch to the groin, as if I didn't do every single thing expected of me last year.

"Yes." My voice rises despite my best efforts to keep calm. "I did everything by the book, if that's what you're asking." I throw my arms out at my sides. "Go ahead and try to determine where I went

wrong last Threshing, but I hope you're prepared for disappointment, because I've been trying for twelve straight months, and I've got nothing!"

By the time I finish ranting, her eyebrows have reached her hairline.

"Fuck." I drop my hands to my sides. "I'm sorry."

"Feel better?" She tilts her head, and a corner of her mouth ticks upward.

I blink and do a quick self-assessment. "Oddly, yes. A little."

"Good." She smacks my shoulder. "Look, I wasn't asking what happened to you last year. You've been pretty clear since Parapet about that subject being off-limits. I was simply suggesting that we try the group thing, if you didn't do it last year, considering you said you were taking opposite actions."

"Right." I bow my head and breathe in deeply before lifting my gaze to hers. "I'm sorry. That makes perfect sense."

She gestures toward the center of the forest. "Shall we?"

I blink. "You still want to team up even though I just lost my temper and displayed how undesirable I am to the fire-breathing dragons in there?"

"Yep." She doesn't flinch. "Not like you didn't find me hiding in a bush."

"Excellent point." Neither of us is at our best today. "Let's do it."

We turn and walk side by side into the depths of the forest, keeping quiet for the most part. We pause when we hear branches snap, then turn as voices scream in the distance.

"Is this how it was last year?" Her voice shakes as we pass by the severed lower half of a cadet's body.

Gods, I hope that's no one we know.

"There were more dragons willing to bond last year, but pretty much." I throw my arm out in front of her when a set of green claws lands a dozen feet away from us, talons flexing in the soil. So damned close.

Both Trina and I lurch to a standstill as it lowers its head in our direction, leveling a glare. It bares its giant teeth, and a deep growl emanates from its throat.

"Lower your eyes," I tell Trina, but I keep mine locked on the green.

Bond me or kill me. Your choice.

The green's eyes flare, but it lifts its head instead of setting me on fire.

My ears strain, listening for whatever call Kaori thinks we're supposed to detect when our dragons appear, but all I hear are leaves crunching under the massive claws as the green walks directly over us, swinging its sharp morningstartail above our heads as it passes by.

"Feel anything?" I ask Trina.

"No," she whispers. "You?" Her neck cranes as she turns to watch it go.

"No." That frustration comes roaring back. Not that I expected the first dragon I encountered to be mine, but it would have been nice.

The dragon disappears among the trees, and Trina turns to me with a furrowed brow.

"You didn't look away," she accuses.

"I didn't." I start walking, and she races to catch up.

"It could have killed you for your insolence."

"But it didn't." I shrug and slow my steps to make it easier for her.

"That's pretty self-destructive." Worry lines her forehead.

"No more so than Parapet or the Gauntlet. Like I said, I'm doing the opposite of what I did last year, and I'm sure as fuck not going to be waiting around when they collect all the cadets who have to restart next year. I can't do it again. I won't." Sunlight streams into a clearing ahead, and my heart starts to race for a reason I can't identify.

"You'd honestly rather meet Malek like that mutilated cadet back there than try again next year?"

"I think instant incineration is probably a better way to go." I lift my hand to my chest and focus on deep, even breaths, but my heartbeat only accelerates.

"That's not funny." She shakes her head as we dodge a scorched

patch of ground.

"Never said it was."

"No wonder you're friends with Gamlyn." Her focus shifts to her shoulder, and she pulls another thorn from the fabric of her uniform. "Shit," she mutters, staring down at the bead of blood on her thumb.

"You all right?"

"Fine. Stupid thorns. I'm not the one with a death wish."

"I don't have a death wish." My mouth tightens as I think that through. "At least not anything beyond normal for the quadrant. We all accept death as a possibility when we climb that tower on Conscription Day. We all risk our mortality for the chance to be riders." Gods, now my chest *hurts*, too. I rub my sternum. How do I explain this to her? "This feels like a second Parapet to me. Either I make it across or I—"

The words die as we step into the clearing, and I drop my hand to my side.

Two dragons stand in the field, one a medium-size orange, one a larger red. Both are looking directly at us, as if they've been waiting.

The orange snarls.

Shit! I lower my gaze to the ground.

Given the unpredictable nature of oranges and the tempers of reds, we may have just entered the most dangerous clearing in the Threshing Valley. Suddenly, waiting until next year doesn't feel like a half-bad idea.

"Mine," Trina whispers, and my eyes dart in her direction. She's staring in wide-eyed wonder at the orange on the left. "I think she's…mine. What do I do?"

"Wouldn't know," I reply just as quietly, and the sudden pang of envy in my chest does absolutely nothing to slow my racing heart. "I've never felt like that."

"What do I do? What do I do?" she repeats, clearly talking to herself now. "I'm going to go talk to her."

And she thinks *I* have a death wish?

"You sure that's the best course of action?" I glance toward the gleaming claws of the orange, and the ache in my chest intensifies.

"No," Trina admits. "But—" Her head tilts and her eyes widen.

"I'm not scared," she calls across the field. "I'm cautious and careful —" Her teeth click as her mouth snaps shut. "That's *not* what I said."

Well, holy shit. She's *talking* to the orange, which means she's been chosen. A smile tugs at my mouth as Trina strides across the field, her fists clenched and head held high as she approaches the Orange Clubtail.

Good for her. She's one less squadmate I'll have to worry about today.

"Why do you not carry the same consideration for yourself?" a gravelly, male voice asks straight into my mind.

What in Malek's name?

My head snaps up, and I find the red glowering down at me.

I should look away, but instead I freeze in place, my eyes glued to the red. What a terrifying, awe-inspiring creature. The ache in my chest disappears, and instead of quickening from the panic that's locked my muscles, my heart rate inexplicably slows down.

Weird. I instantly catalog the unique horn pattern, size, and distinctive scar traversing the lower half of his right foreleg and recognize the red from the cards Kaori gave us. Sliseag. Red Swordtail. Approximate age of seventy-three. Two recorded riders, the most recent of whom died the year before last. *Discerning and combative*. That's what Kaori called him during his lecture.

There's no fucking way any dragon known as *discerning* is bonding a repeat like me, which means death is imminent. I close my eyes and accept my dismal fate.

My chest clenches. I have royally screwed this all up, and now it's too late. I never should have tempted Malek with my bond-or-die mantra.

"I do not wish to repeat myself."

"Are…" I pry one eye open slowly, then glance left and right, like there might be another cadet in the nearby vicinity. "Are you talking to me?"

Sliseag's golden eyes narrow even more, and steam streams from his nostrils.

Fuck. Now I've pissed him off. At least he hasn't lowered his—

His head descends into an attack position, bringing his teeth

within fifteen feet of me.

So much for that thought.

"Has the extra year you've spent in the quadrant addled your wits?" he asks, a deep, thrumming growl emanating from his throat. *"Or are you so lost to your own self-loathing that you cannot apply your previous thoughts about the female and Bregh to yourself?"*

"I'm not lost in self-loathing." My head draws back at the insult before I fully process what he just said. I glance toward Trina as she faces down the orange—Bregh—then blink before whipping my gaze back to Sliseag.

My lungs falter. If he's talking to me, he's chosen me. It's the first sign of a bond. This has to be a mistake. Heat prickles my face and I cringe, knowing Sliseag can see embarrassment turn my skin red.

"I do not need to witness the blood flush your face to feel your humiliation." The long autumn grass between us bends with the force of his scoff. *"I am acquainted with every aspect of you, Sawyer Henrick. Even those you wish to hide in the name of decorum."*

Indignation overpowers embarrassment, and my spine straightens. "I think *humiliation* might be an overstatement—"

"It is not." His swordtail swishes through the grass in a display of temper, arcing toward me before returning to its previous position. *"Nor is there a* mistake. *You insult me by inferring I am anything but infallible."*

Fuck me. Insults equal fire. I snap my mouth shut, catching my tongue between my front teeth in the process. The taste of metal accompanies the quick burst of pain. I touch my index finger to the tip of my tongue, and it comes away red. Great, now he'll think I can't even speak without bursting a blood vessel. "I didn't say *mistake*."

"*You thought it, which is the same. Only honesty is acceptable between us."* His upper lip curls, baring a set of dripping teeth. *"Lie to me again, and you'll get that introduction to your death god you keep griping about."*

"I'm not—" I kill the sentence before it causes Sliseag to do the same to me, then fill my lungs with a stabilizing breath. This would be a great time for that emotional blacksmith to show up. My hands

flex at my sides as I search for the right, the *honest* words. "Yes, I thought the word 'mistake.' I know who you are. I know your last rider was one of the best of her year, which I am *not*. I'm a godsdamn repeat. You don't want to risk your bond on me. It would only make sense for you to seek out Liam Mairi or Rhiannon Matthias—"

"I seek you," he snarls. *"That is the second time you have insinuated that I am incorrect, and you will not live if you repeat the offense."*

"For being so intent on bonding me, you sure do threaten to kill me frequently," I snap in retort. Pretty sure the god of wisdom just turned his back on me for that move, not that Hedeon has ever blessed me previously.

Sliseag's eyes flare, the scaly ridges that look like eyebrows rise, and he sheathes his teeth. *"That fire is precisely why I choose you. The anger you conceal from those around you matches my own."*

Speech fails me. My struggle to regulate my emotions is his catnip?

"Yes, though I do not care for the comparison to a house cat." Sliseag's head slides over the grass as his neck moves in a reptilian pattern that should scare the shit out of me but doesn't. *"I see* all *of you. Your shame, your rage, your obstinance, your determination to persevere despite it. You know who I am, but I know* you."

The very rage he speaks of bubbles up to my surface, not that it takes much to unearth it. It's always there, a fingernail scratch away from exposure. My hands curl into fists.

"Accept yourself as I do," he demands. *"Naturally, you may present yourself to the rest of the world however you wish."*

"I *may*?" My spine stiffens to steel. "Thanks for—"

"But I will only tolerate—"

"—the permission." I raise my voice as he tramples me verbally. "But you don't get—"

"—transparency within the bond." He cuts me off again.

"—a say in how I choose to preserve my dignity." My tone pitches higher, and I take a single step toward him.

"Without it, you are indeed the risk you proclaim—"

Enough.

"Would you let me get a fucking word in?" I shout.

He blinks, and his voice falls silent in my head, but his tail flicks at the far edge of the field.

"You want transparency?" I challenge.

"I require it."

"Fine." Fuck it. If he wants honesty, I'll give it to him. Then we'll see if he's so certain about his choice. "Yes, I'm angry. I had one of the best times on the Gauntlet my first year. I walked at the front of my squad for Presentation, and it meant nothing. I listened to every piece of advice Kaori gave last Threshing. I memorized every card, studied every breed, and even had the audacity to stand in front of a snarling green, only to have it swat me away with its not-so-gentle scorpiontail when I refused to back down." I take another step. "I watched others be selected, cadets who broke every rule and didn't bother to conceal the hatred in their hearts, while I did everything right. And all it got me was a two-week stay in the infirmary and an instruction to do it all over again!"

The intense focus of his gaze is all that indicates he's even listening as I yell.

"I highly doubt that someone as *infallible* as you could understand the humiliation of being labeled an unbonded in the quadrant. It's unbearable to walk the halls, knowing you're not enough, found unworthy by the ones you've spent your life preparing to meet, to please." The excruciating pain cuts into me like a rusted blade shredding its incurable infection in the wound mid-slice.

His eyes narrow, but he remains quiet.

"But by gods, you don't get to show any of that." I shake my head violently. "Only strength is permissible in the quadrant, permissible to *you*. We have to be hard as steel, sharper than a honed blade. Perfection isn't the exception, it's the standard, and those who don't meet it find themselves bleeding out on the challenge mat to preserve the efficacy of the wing. Can't have any weak riders running around feeling things, now can we?"

A burst of air hits me in the face, jarring me from my tirade, and

my head jerks to the left as Bregh and Trina launch. They take to the sky with powerful wingbeats that send gust after gust in our direction. I only catch a glimpse of Trina as they climb vertically, and my brow furrows.

Her knees aren't bent, but if that's the seat position that works for her, then…all right.

"Are you finished getting your damned words in?" Sliseag asks, and my gaze jumps back to meet his.

A knot twists every organ in my abdomen. I just lost my shit on the most temperamental breed known to dragonkind. My throat threatens to seal shut, but I don't mutter the apology that hangs on the tip of my wounded tongue. He asked for honesty. I delivered. "Yes."

"I relish in your anger." A glow of excitement brightens his eyes. *"I have felt your shame through your memories, and while I accept the burden of responsibility for last year's misfortunes, I do not regret my choice—"*

"Responsibility?" I question, my eyebrows hiking skyward.

Sliseag lunges forward and snaps his teeth within inches of my face.

My soul all but leaves my body.

"Silence," he orders, withdrawing his head slowly. *"It is my turn to speak."*

I nod, and at the edge of my vision, Bregh and Trina begin a series of dives overhead.

"Feel whatever you wish, but your shame is annoyingly misplaced." A breath of steam washes over me. *"Yes, you have plenty to be embarrassed of. Your bow work is atrocious, your understanding of physics is mortifying, the only call you answer to is pain, and I know of at least two occasions when your attempts at approaching a potential mate were so awkward, I found myself embarrassed* for *you."*

My jaw slackens as he lists my faults.

"But you were not unworthy last year." Sliseag lifts his head, exposing his throat. *"I simply wasn't available to you. When half of a pair cannot open themselves to a bond, the other must wait, as you*

have." His tail flicks again as I process what he's telling me. *"Unfortunately, that waiting has created a self-doubt I will not tolerate, and you* will *overcome it."*

"And if I don't?" I ask quietly.

"I'm willing to risk my infallibility on the odds of your persevering. You have an excellent history of having done so." He straightens to his full, intimidating height, and my neck strains as I follow the motion with my eyes. *"Take your seat and let us join your squadmates."*

A high-pitched scream rends the air, and I spot a rapidly falling shape to the left of Sliseag's head, only making out details as it comes closer.

Black leathers. Auburn curls.

Trina.

Her limbs flail in midair as she hurtles toward the ground against an orange backdrop, and air flees from my lungs.

Malek, *no.* She's fallen off Bregh. And there's not a damned thing I can do about it.

I watch in horror, completely helpless, as she disappears in the trees beyond the edge of the clearing. A sickening thud follows soon after.

"Trina!" My body lurches as I take a step toward the trees.

"Unfortunate." Sliseag tilts his head as though listening to something. *"There is nothing to be done. Her life is extinguished. She is…irrecoverable."*

"No." I double over, bracing my hands on my knees as I struggle to breathe through the instant nausea that accompanies his declaration. I've seen my share of squadmates die, but none on the cusp of getting everything we've worked for. She was so fucking close. The unfairness of it clenches my heart with an iron fist.

How am I supposed to join my squadmates *now*?

"You take your seat," Sliseag orders.

I force myself upright and stare into the trees as if Trina might magically walk through them.

"Choose," he hisses.

"Choose what?" I tear my focus from the forest to look him in the

eye as he peers down at me with blatant expectation. The fist squeezes tighter.

"I will not attach myself to another rider who cannot adapt to loss, so choose. Climb or wallow. Persevere or perish. As you put it earlier, bond or die*."* Steam wafts from his nostrils as he flares them. *"I am not the only one with agency here, but I approach the limits of my patience."*

The threat of losing him, of losing the future hovering at the edge of my fingertips, shakes me like nothing else could. I banish the fist that holds my heartbeat prisoner, mentally peeling it away, finger by finger.

I'm not unworthy. I was never unworthy. Sliseag just wasn't ready yet.

Yes, Trina's gone. But Rhiannon, Violet, and Ridoc will be waiting for me. That's the only possibility permitted to exist in my mind.

Sliseag is willing to risk being wrong about me.

I won't allow him to find out what being wrong feels like. Not on my account, at least.

"I choose you," I say to Sliseag before mounting with a run. It's as natural as breathing, and within minutes, I find myself in the seat, exactly where I've always belonged. Suddenly, it's inconceivable that this day would have ended any other way, unfathomable that I would lose something so magnificent over the cost of a measly year. "I would have repeated another year if I knew you would be waiting for me at the end of it."

"Quit waxing poetic before you embarrass us both, and hold on."

My hands grasp onto his pommel scales, and I grin as he heaves us into the sky.



633 AU
Aotrom—Brown Swordtail
(Male) Descended from the Aldayrmar Line
Estimated Age: 21
Recorded Riders: 0

—The Compendium of Dragonkind,
last updated by Colonel Valin Kaori



Ridoc

My mouth tastes like shit as I make my way through the Threshing Valley.

Scratch that. My mouth tastes like I scavenged up a dead dragon, somehow brought it back to life, then let it shit the contents

of its intestines into my mouth. Like decades-old, still-decaying shit. And of course I didn't bring a waterskin out here.

Are we even *allowed* to bring water? Or is the general misery of our dehydration mixing with the adrenaline brought by potential death part of the charm of Threshing? I was too busy hurling up my breakfast in front of my squadmates to ask, but water would have been wasted between the second and third bouts of vomiting anyway. At least I was alone for those two shining examples of my excellence under pressure.

Gods, what I wouldn't give to wash the taste of my own vomit out of my mouth. Pretty sure the smell is right up there with fear when it comes to deterring a potential dragon.

Because that's what I want, right? A fucking dragon. That's why I left my continuously arguing parents, put on a black uniform, and now wake up every morning wondering if it's the last time I'll see my bed—or whoever happens to be in it with me. All for a dragon.

A dragon who might be just as keen to char me as to bond me. Excellent plan.

What the fuck was I thinking? I don't want to die today.

Nausea clenches my stomach, and my mouth waters again as I pass some coniferous tree I'm sure only Sorrengail knows the name of and move deeper into the forest. What could possibly be left in my stomach at this point?

Focus. I'm better than this.

Scratch that. The dragons in this forest would be *lucky* to have me as their rider. I'm funny. I'm smart. I keep things interesting, and I'm scrappy as hell when it comes to the mat. I can be positive about this whole thing.

I breathe through the worst of the nausea, and my shoulders drop with relief when I spot the small stream ahead. Thank you, Zihnal. Lucky indeed.

The trees to my right move.

My stomach abandons threatening to eject its innards and flat-out attempts to flee the premises, dropping to the forest floor as my head swivels toward the motion.

All movement ceases.

Huh.

Well. Fuck. I can't decide if that's a good thing or a bad thing.

I begin walking again, and the trees stay where they're supposed to as I approach the shaded creek, but I keep one eye on the branches as I crouch beside the little brook. Once I'm sure nothing's following—or stalking—me, I cup my hand and dip it into the cool running water. Then I pull the time-tested swish-and-spit before actually drinking. The water is crisp and—

Movement catches my eye a second before water splashes all over me, smacking into the side of my face and dousing my hair before dripping down my cheek.

What the fuck? I wipe the water off my face as I spring to my feet to confront whatever asshole-shaped cadet decided to douse me.

A giant brown claw flexes in the stream, forming an instant pool as water gushes around curved talons.

Don't puke. Don't puke. Don't puke.

Wait. Is this…it? I always thought I would bond a green, or maybe a red to force me to take things more seriously, but a brown would be a great fit, too. I look up at its ankle and then keep going, my gaze running past the thicker chest scales and up the thinner, more vulnerable spots on its neck until I find a pair of amused golden eyes studying me.

It's the Brown Swordtail that stood next to the small golden dragon at Presentation, and it's looking at me as if it wants to see what I'm going to do next, like it's…testing me.

Oh, shit. There aren't enough swear words in the common tongue, because I know exactly which dragon this is.

"Oh, no." I shake my head and take a giant step back from the edge of the creek, water sliding beneath the collar of my uniform. "Not you. Nope." Any dragon but this one.

"Yes, me." The brown narrows his eyes. *"I surely misunderstand you."*

"You surely do *not*." I throw my hands up. "And whatever you do, don't keep talking to me. That's the stuff you save for your chosen rider."

He lifts his claw and flicks it forward, sending a wave of water in my direction.

It hits my boots, instantly soaking the leather.

"Nice." I lift one sodden boot and grimace. Now I'm going to have wet feet all day. Fucking fantastic. "See? That right there is why you and I wouldn't be a good match."

"I decide what's good." He peels his lips up, baring his teeth.

My stomach asks if I'd like to see what meager contents it still holds.

"Don't do that." I sigh and bring my gaze to meet his in a complete breach of protocol, but I can't really tell if he's snarling or smiling. "It's nothing against you personally—"

"As if there could be any deficiency found in me*."* He stalks forward.

"—but I read over the cards Kaori gave us," I try to explain, my palms out. "And you're only twenty."

He pauses and tilts his head a dozen feet above me, and I have no choice but to crane my neck to look up at him. *"So are you."*

"Exactly." I point my finger at his face. "That's, like, what in dragon years? Five?"

"Dragons mature infinitely faster than humans." A giant glob of saliva drips off his fang and lands on my shoulder.

Gross.

"Really proving your point there." I run my fingers over my arm in an attempt to shove the goop off me. "Look, I'm self-aware enough to know I need a dragon who will keep me in check, and a guy who's only seen as many summers as I have isn't a responsible choice."

"Responsible or not, you are my rider." He lowers his head and inhales, lifting my hair.

"I'm not." One very weird sniffing session later, he raises his ginormous head.

"You are," he insists.

"Am not." I shake my head.

"Are too." He narrows his eyes.

"See? Look at us. You're mentally five years old." I throw my

hands out at my sides.

"If I'm five, then you're four."

A reluctant smile tugs at my mouth. He's got me there. "Precisely why you'd be better off with someone like Rhiannon Matthias or Sawyer Henrick. They'd be more responsible choices for you." They wouldn't appreciate his sense of humor, but not everyone is as comedically evolved as I am. Then again, not everyone grew up in a house where they had to learn to cut the tension between their parents.

"Have I misjudged you, Ridoc Gamlyn?" he asks, his head rearing back like *he's* the one who's offended when I'm the one covered in water and spit.

My mouth opens, then slowly closes, because if he's talking to me, that means he's already seen my thoughts, my memories, seen *me*. "Probably not."

"Perhaps I have." He huffs a blast of steam down on me. Now I'm wet *and* sticky. Awesome. *"Perhaps we do not share a kinship in being underestimated by those around us."*

My eyebrows rise. Well…hold on, because yes.

"Perhaps I should have listened to my elders when they suggested I choose a more balanced rider instead of one who matched me in energy and mischief."

Did he just admit to making a mistake—

Wait. Mischief? Now *that* has my full attention. Is that what splashing me was all about? I absolutely need a dragon less impulsive than I am, which browns are by nature, but I could be down for a partner who doesn't immediately see me as a project in need of fixing or mentoring. "Are dragons even capable of mischief?"

"Now you'll never know. Pity," he says with a haughty tone of sarcasm, then retreats a step. Suddenly I feel like I've completely, irrevocably fucked this up, because he's doing exactly what I would in the same situation, which means we're alike. Like, really alike.

Am I meeting the dragon version of…me?

"*You seek a dragon to* keep you in check*, while I seek a rider capable of sharpening my edges instead of blunting them like my elders. Too bad."* He turns in the open space of the creek and begins

to walk away, and my jaw drops at the challenge he cleverly disguised as an insult.

A pit opens in my stomach at the realization that *he* is my dragon. No matter what I thought I wanted, what I thought I needed, Aotrom is him. And I'm most definitely messing this up.

"Wait!" I shout, but of course he doesn't, because he's a dragon, and I just rejected him in what might be my most responsible yet biggest mistake *ever*. "Aotrom!"

"Aotrom," he corrects, giving the first *o* in his name its own syllable while softening the sound of the second as he saunters to the west, his wings tucked against his body. His massive swordtail swings in my direction. *"Your attempt at pronunciation is embarrassing."*

Seriously?

"How am I supposed to know the pronunciation? You've never bonded before, and I don't speak *dragon*— Shit!" His tail splices through the air in front of me, and I drop to the ground, catching myself with my hands. My palm stings, and the giant brown tail swings so close to my head, I feel it ruffle my hair. What the fuck is wrong with him? Is he trying to kill me? "Are all twenty-year-old dragons assholes?"

"Are all twenty-year-old humans humorless blockheads?" He swings his tail again.

"Whoa! Watch that tail!" I press myself so far into the grass that I may as well start chewing on it like a cow. The tip of his tail swooshes overhead. "And who are you calling humorless?" Of all the things he could call me, that's somehow…offensive. I hop to my feet as his tail swings upward and start running after him.

"You." He doubles down.

What a dick.

"I have a fucking fantastic sense of humor, I'll have you know!" I shout between breaths as I race to catch up with him, my boots pounding the fallen leaves beneath my feet.

"Do you?" He halts suddenly between a pair of giant redwood trees and swivels his head back toward me at a freakishly unnatural angle that makes me wonder if the bones in his neck connect. His

glare stops me in my tracks.

I skid to a halt somewhere near his back leg.

He snaps his teeth and makes it all kinds of awkward.

"You've *made this awkward,"* he accuses, huffing like I've disappointed him.

"My mistake." I throw my hands out again in the universal sign of surrender, and I note a twinge in my knee that, yep, is bleeding. Huh. I must have landed on a twig or something back there. "Making things awkward is kind of my specialty."

His head tilts like he's debating the veracity of my statement. *"That is true."*

"All right." I take a minuscule step forward. "I was wrong. You're definitely mine. Or I'm yours. However you want to think of it is fine with me. What do you say we try this again?" I attempt to smile, but it feels more like a curved grimace.

He huffs a breath that stinks like sulfur. I take the fact that I'm still breathing as a good sign and forge ahead.

"I could go back to the stream and everything." I nod vigorously. "But this time I'll get it right, and we'll fly off into the sunset together."

"It's barely noon."

"Now who's humorless?" I cock my head to the side and lift my brows. "Let's do it over. Please."

He blinks. *"No."*

"No?" My chest tightens. What in Malek's name am I supposed to do now?

"No." His nostrils flare a few times. *"If you want to be my rider, prove it."*

"How?"

"We'll see if you can keep up with me." He crouches, then bounds upward, jumping higher than any dragon I've seen, flaring his wings when he's clear of the trees and taking off into the sun.

"I can't fly!" I yell the obvious as he soars higher.

"*Your loss."* He pulls what Kaori likes to call a switchback maneuver as his momentum stalls, flipping his body weight and coming back toward me in a steep dive. At this angle, at this speed,

he's going to land right on top of me in about five seconds.

Fuck. Am I supposed to show him I'm smart and I'll move? Or demonstrate my trust and keep my feet right where they are? Browns have the fastest reflexes, so he'd probably appreciate me showing that I can match him.

"Choose wisely." He's almost on me when he opens his wings, stalling his descent just before the trees, then snaps them in tight and plummets, four claws down.

"That's not helpful!" I take a single step backward, just enough to show that I can both trust him and be flexible. At least I hope that's the message it sends.

He lands with a *thud* right where I was standing, shaking the ground. The force of impact sends leaves flying, and my vision goes dark.

A heartbeat later, I sputter and rake the leaves off my face. I'm covered in them, thanks to him spitting all over me a few minutes ago.

"You look like a feathered goose." He chortles. *"Where is your sense of humor now?"*

"You've made your point." One side of my mouth rises in a lopsided grin as I pluck leaf after leaf from my shoulders.

"Points. Yes. Score one yourself, and we'll see what happens." He pivots left and begins climbing up the giant redwood that's as thick as he is. Bark falls to the ground as he pulls himself up the tree claw by claw. *"Catch me if you can."*

He has to be kidding me. Right?

"What are you? A damned cat?" My jaw hangs as he climbs the height of his full length, and the tip of his tail swings a few feet off the ground. "Nowhere in our studies did our professor mention any of your kind scaling trees."

"Not everything about our kind is meant for human knowledge," he counters, swiveling his head to look down at me and swinging his tail like a pendulum.

My heart jolts and I jump to the side as it whizzes by, cutting through the air like the giant double-edged blade it is. "Little too close for comfort!"

"You missed an opportunity to gain your seat." Sarcasm drips from his voice.

"You want me to get up there…like this?" I jump forward as the tail comes back by, swinging at an arc that tells me he knows exactly where I am and can skewer me with that thing if he wants.

"If you can't think on those clawless feet, we are no match."

"Got it." Holy shit is he making me work for it, and I'm all right with that. Or at least, I will be as soon as I figure out how to get through this. The tree is too big to scale, which means the only way up there is on *him*. But rising to a challenge is my specialty, and the faster I prove that, the quicker we'll fly off into the sunset together like the perfect little pairing we are.

The tail swings again, and I leap out of its path.

"I'm growing bored," he warns in a singsong voice.

"I somehow doubt that," I mutter as his tail continues its upward swing. He's having a grand old time fucking with me. He thinks *this* is funny? Hope he realizes I'm going to fuck with him twice as hard. For the rest of my life. Once I get up there, that is.

Think. Swordtails aren't as sharp as daggertails, but they can still cut a gryphon in half when attacked at velocity…which Aotrom doesn't have with his stationary positioning. Hands are out, unless I want to risk losing one, and I definitely have to steer clear of the pointy tip.

His tail starts its descending arc. If I don't get on this time, who knows what he'll do. I'll probably have to chase him all the way back to the quadrant.

Fuck it. I've got one thing on me that won't cut as easily as my hands. Let's do this.

I undo my leather belt, grab hold of the buckle, and whip it off my waist. Then I take an end in each hand and start running alongside his swinging tail. My heart pounds as I full-out sprint so close that my shoulder rubs against the hardened scale that forms the flat side of the swordtail as it starts to swing upward again. The second the end of the blade is at the height of my shoulder, I hook my belt over the tip of his tail and pray to Zihnal that I miss the sharpest portion.

Then I leap and hold on for dear life. The leather doesn't have to survive the trip; it just needs to hold out long enough to give me the momentum I need.

"Naturally you're undressing in a stressful situation."

I half snort, half laugh, and my stomach dives as I'm swung upward, tearing my gaze from the forest floor that grows more distant with every second. There's not much to see with Aotrom's tail blocking most of my view, and considering the rending sound coming from just above me, this ride is almost over.

The belt snaps and falls from my hands as I'm catapulted into the branches.

This is going to hurt like a mother—

"Fuck!" I grunt as my midsection collides with a tree limb that's about eye level with Aotrom. Not one to miss an opportunity, I wrap my arms over the branch, then haul myself up to stand on the thing. It's more than thick enough to support my weight, thank Zihnal, and I've landed close enough that it only takes a few scurried steps to reach the trunk.

"Close, yet I don't think this tree will let you ride it into battle." Do all dragons openly mock their riders? Or just mine?

"Smart-ass." I grab hold of the trunk with both hands to stabilize myself, then cringe at the sticky substance that courses over them. Fucking *sap*. I've stuck my hands into one of the furrows Aotrom dug with his claws.

A low grumble sounds from his chest, and I swear I can hear him laughing in my head as his gaze swivels to track me.

"I'll be the one laughing in a second," I promise, studying the distance to his back. This is either going to earn me his respect or really piss him off, and there's only one way to find out.

Bending my knees, I jump forward with every ounce of strength I have. My boots make impact on top of his nose, but by the time his eyes narrow on me, I've already leaped again, this time aiming for his neck.

I miss my intended target by a measly twelve inches and start to fall.

Fuck. Me.

My ribs tighten and my heart thunders in my ears as I drop like a freaking stone, flailing my arms as my vision is consumed by brown scales and spikes. I land on his shoulder with an impact that jars my teeth.

"You jump like a squirrel."

"You're the one in the godsdamn tree," I counter, grabbing hold of his scales with my sticky hands for balance. He's still clinging vertically to the trunk, which means if I make one wrong step now, I'll end up on the forest floor with a broken neck.

I wedge my boots into the gaps between his scales, then traverse over his shoulder and onto his back. My stomach churns every time I look down, but step by step, I move sideways across him until I reach the raised scales of his pommel and seat.

By Zihnal, I did it! Laughter trips out of me as I lock my hands around his scales and work my feet up until I'm in some semblance of a seat.

"You're oddly mirthful for someone who clings to my back like a frog."

"Consider this my point," I tell him as my arms start to shake with the exertion of keeping myself in this position. "You may have stuck leaves to my face, but there's a trail of sap across some very hard-to-reach places on your back. Good luck getting that off."

Aotrom stiffens, then lets out a chortle.

"Don't worry. I'm sure you can find some snow up in the peaks to help harden it so it chips away. Ice will do the trick." I can't help but laugh again, even knowing I've got maybe sixty seconds at this precarious angle before muscle fatigue causes me to fall to my death. "I'd say this calls us even, wouldn't you?"

"Never." He lunges from the tree, straight into the sky, taking me completely off guard, though I keep my seat. *"But I would say it makes us equals."*



633 AU
Deigh—Red Daggertail
(Male) Descended from the Wybjorian Line
Estimated Age: 62
Recorded Riders: 1

—The Compendium of Dragonkind,
last updated by Colonel Valin Kaori



Liam

Wood curls at the edge of my father's penknife, then falls to the forest floor as I finish the pull stroke along what will become the future figurine's left horn. I didn't quite nail the pattern from Kaori's cards on either of my last two attempts, so I'll leave them rough for

now.

By the end of the day, I'll be able to do all of him justice.

For the third time in the last hour, someone screams in the distance. I stop carving and look up from my piece. None of the trees around me move, and once I'm sure whatever danger has found my nameless year-mate isn't headed in my direction, I get to work again. Unlike the rest of my squadmates, fear didn't plague me while walking into the forest, and the only anxiety I feel revolves around whether or not the other marked ones in my year survive the day. My squadmates, too. Most of them are all right.

I've been out here near the center of the valley for a couple of hours, led by an undeniable tug that was replaced by an instinct to sit tight the moment I reached this tree. So I'm sitting tight under the shade of a sprawling Polylepis tree, because who am I to deny the first request my future dragon has made of me? Reds have tempers. I have patience. We'll be a good match. The Polylepis tree is pretty ironic, though. I haven't seen one since leaving Tyrrendor.

My thumb presses against the flat edge of my knife's blade as I start on the second horn, taking it slow like Dad taught me. The dappled shade on the ground to my right moves opposite to the breeze, and a corner of my mouth lifts.

"Going to have to get better than that to sneak up on me." I finish the stop cut, and another shaving falls to the ground. "I've been trained by the best, you know."

"If I was trying to sneak, you'd never know it." Xaden walks out from behind a nearby tree, a smile making a brief and rare appearance on his face. "Because yes, I am the best," he says with the casual arrogance he presents to the majority of the world.

As the most powerful rider of our generation, he's more than earned the arrogance and the fear he incites in every cadet who doesn't wear a rebellion relic on their arm. But not only do I possess said relic, I know him better than most people. We spent the darkest days of our lives together, learning to survive as foster brothers after our parents were executed in Calldyr. I respect the hell out of him and love him like a brother. I've never been scared of him.

"Is this your Threshing plan?" He leans back against the trunk

beside me and glances at the dragon emerging from the chunk of balsa wood in my hand. "Linger under a tree and hope the first dragon that comes across you is yours? I have to say, you didn't choose a particularly secure location to break out the arts and crafts." His eyes all but roll in my direction.

"I'm lingering exactly where I was told to. My dragon will find me."

"Everyone I've observed so far is running around out there getting into fights, bonding, or becoming scorch marks, and you're whittling."

"Is my wingleader disappointed in me?" I grin and return to carving the horns.

"Never. I respect your tranquility." He grimaces. "Scratch that. I *will* be disappointed if you get burned alive by some disgruntled orange because you can't be bothered to hold a more defensible position. But I checked the list of willing dragons, and none of them this year had riders killed in the apostasy, so you shouldn't have any seeking you out personally. If you get roasted, it won't be a revenge kill."

My eyebrows rise. That was a scenario I hadn't thought about. Our parents' rebellion took out more than a few riders. "Do you check every year?"

Xaden nods as he scans our surroundings. I swear, he never lets his guard down, but I get it. Countless riders would love to be known as the one who killed Fen Riorson's son. "Bodhi will still be here to help, but you'll need to take over that duty once I graduate in July."

"Consider it done." There's nothing I wouldn't do for him, and not just because we were fostered together. He bears one hundred and seven scars that gave every marked one a chance to survive, and while entering the quadrant comes with a high chance of death, his sacrifice saves us from a certainty of it. If one of us proves disloyal to Navarre, his life is forfeit, so *my* loyalty to him will never come into question.

Odd to think the very children the Navarrian forces wanted to slaughter as punishment for our parents' crimes will be serving in

their wings next year.

"You still thinking it's the Red Daggertail coming for you? Sgaeyl usually tells me which dragons are interested in marked ones, but she's annoyingly silent about you." He folds his arms across his chest and continues sweeping the perimeter with his eyes. Pretty sure those shadows spreading out from the tree on the left are his, too. "Can't lie. I hoped her mate might be ready to bond this year."

"In hopes the second-biggest dragon on the Continent would bond *me*?" I can't help the laugh that rumbles through my chest. As if that was ever going to happen.

"It's a logical conclusion. You're the best of your year." Xaden side-eyes me.

I shake my head. "I wouldn't say that."

"I would." He glances pointedly at the Gauntlet patch on my uniform. "Fastest at the Gauntlet. Formidable on the mat. Excellent academics—"

Now I'm the one scoffing. "Next thing I know, you'll be keeping track of the women I take to bed."

"Elodie Praxedes was an interesting choice." He lifts his dark brows at me. "I'm all for fucking with leadership, but you really went and *fucked* your leadership."

My jaw drops. "How could you possibly know that?"

"Bodhi told me." He shrugs. "Not that I'm judging."

"You clearly are." I tilt my head at him. Though I know he means well, having Xaden's cousin as the executive officer of my section is officially annoying. Damn it. I thought we'd been discreet. "It was just the one time. Neither of us has feelings or anything. And you're one to talk. You think I don't see the way you stare at the general's daughter when you think no one is looking? The one who happens to be in your chain of command?"

His head whips forward and a muscle in his jaw flexes again. "If you catch me staring at Sorrengail, it's because I'm fantasizing about killing her."

Yeah, right. He's got it so bad he can't even see it.

A smile erupts on my face. "Oh, you're fantasizing about *something*, and let's not pretend it's murder. You're a good liar, but

you can't fool me. Garrick's probably caught on, too, but I bet you've successfully kept it from Bodhi, right?" I'd never dream of giving him shit in front of others, but it's just the two of us out here, which means he's fair game for teasing.

"Stop poking at things you know nothing about." He unfolds his arms and slides his hands into his pockets. From the way the shadows at the edges of the trees sharpen, I know I struck a chord.

"That's the definition of what little brothers do." My smile deepens. "Besides, we both know you can't kill her, and even if you could…you wouldn't."

"You grossly underestimate my hatred of her mother." His face hardens.

"I underestimate almost nothing when it comes to you. I know what you're capable of." My smile falls. "But you of all people know it's wrong to punish someone for their parent's actions. From what I hear, she's a good person. I don't know her personally, but I bet I'd like her if I did."

"You like everyone, which is probably why everyone likes you." He sighs so deeply that I know it's time to move on from this topic.

"Back to the point. You don't have to keep tabs on me." I carve away another shaving near the wooden dragon's head. "I'm holding my own."

"That's the definition of what big brothers do. It's our sacred duty. An honor, really." He smirks. "Wait until Sloane gets here next year and we'll see how you feel about keeping tabs on siblings."

Shit. He's right. I stare toward the south, wishing I could cut the distance like a knife to see how my little sister is doing. Our communications were severed when I crossed the parapet, but I've been writing and stashing away letters to give her once she gets here so she knows she hasn't been forgotten.

The anticipation of seeing her again threatens to crack my chest wide open. I haven't been able to hug her, to assure her that we'll get through this, since the day we were snatched out of our home after watching both our parents die within twelve hours, then sent to be fostered at separate estates. I was lucky to end up at Tirvainne with Xaden and Duke Lindell, who'd successfully hidden his loyalty to

the rebellion from King Tauri, but Sloane wasn't as fortunate.

Another distant scream sounds, this time from the north, but neither of us bothers to look. The sound came from far enough away that we aren't in any direct danger.

Xaden looks over at my figurine. "Is that him? Your Red Daggertail?"

I nod. "It's Deigh, and to answer your earlier question, I'm certain I'm his." My thumb presses against the blade gently as I start the more delicate features of his snarling face. I took one look at him during Presentation and felt it. "You didn't feel the same certainty about Sgaeyl at Presentation?"

Xaden scoffs. "Sgaeyl didn't bother showing up to Presentation. She'd never be so banal as to conform to quadrant expectations."

"I can see that." That Blue Daggertail he's bonded to is as vicious as they come, a fitting match for her equally vicious rider. "Any last words of advice before Deigh shows up?"

"If he's a red, then his temper is probably worse than Sgaeyl's, so don't piss him off."

My hands pause on the wood. "No dragon in this world has a temper worse than yours."

A corner of his mouth rises. "You might be right. But while Sgaeyl is ruthless, she has enviable control of where that temper is unleashed. Pinpoint accuracy with lethal consequences. Reds tend to act on the rage and think about it later."

"So don't make him angry. Got it." I nod. "Anything else?"

"All that bullshit Kaori feeds you about approach techniques is just that—bullshit." He turns to face me, bracing his shoulder on the trunk of the tree. "Yes, those rules will keep you from getting torched by other dragons, but none of them really matter to the one that's chosen you. They know everything—the best and worst of you—before they deign to speak to you. So if you don't have manners, they already know and accept that about you."

"Enjoyable thought. Someone knowing everything about you and accepting you anyway." I won't have to explain the relic, or my parents' loyalties, because he already knows.

"It's the strongest relationship you'll ever have. And don't worry

about whether he'll side with us when it comes to what's happening beyond the border. If he's chosen you, he already has." Xaden straightens. "Trust me. There's nothing you can do to change his mind, except maybe run or refuse to mount."

"So I shouldn't lower my eyes?" I ask.

"Oh, no. Lower your fucking eyes just in case another dragon—" He tilts his head to the side and stares off into the distance, which usually means he's talking to Sgaeyl. "Godsdamn it. I have to go." He pulls me into a hug, thumping my back with his fist. "Be careful."

"What's wrong?" I ask as he lets go of me.

"Two words as usual this year. Violet. Fucking. Sorrengail. Five-foot-nothing pain in my ass just got herself involved with Sgaeyl's pet. I'll see you on the flight field, Liam." He strides away, disappearing into the trees to the west.

"That's three words," I whisper with a smile, damn well knowing he can't hear me as I begin carving the figurine's snout. Funny, I've never seen him so obviously obsessed over a woman. He's never been one for attachments, and he barely tolerated Cat during the times I'd seen them together last year. Thank the gods that arrangement fell through, because it looks like my brother might have finally met his match. Good. He needs someone to crack open the impossibly thick walls he's built—

Deigh's head appears in front of the lowest tree branch ahead of me, and I startle. One second the space was empty, and in the next, he's simply *there*, dark red scales and all. My knife slips off the figurine and slices into my forefinger just deep enough to draw blood.

"Shit," I mutter and shove the carving into my pocket with one hand and sheathe the penknife with the other, somehow not managing to fumble, considering I have a pair of golden eyes assessing every move I make.

"Your last attempts were poor." His voice is higher than I expected, more human-sounding than monstrous. *"Is this the closer look you need to be accurate?"*

Joy erupts behind my rib cage, and I grin. He's really here. I'm really his. He will be the one thing in this world no one can take

away from me. “I’ll get it right this time.”

“See that you do. I have not avoided holes in my wings and scars through my scales to be misrepresented by a slip of your knife.” He sniffs loudly, rustling the leaves at my feet. *“And your blood is a shade too dark for my scales.”*

“I don’t usually wound myself.” I test the cut, happy to see it’s already scabbing.

“Good.” He lifts his head to stare down at me. *“You enjoy the tree. Good. I chose it on purpose. I have seen them in your memories of your home. You favor the ones on the southern hillside, do you not? I find them cumbersome to hunting, but humans seem to like them.”*

“You’ve been to Mairghdelle?” Not sure why I’m surprised. Dragons fly all over Tyrrendor, and though it’s not an outpost, my family’s isolated estate is no exception. Though it now belongs to a Navarrian noble. The thought is almost enough to steal my joy. Almost.

“Of course. You are not my first rider,” he chides. *“And those in my line have always favored those in yours. Are you ready to become a rider, Liam Mairi, son of Rune Master Celadine?”*

My heart clenches at my mother’s name, at the mention of her unmatched skill with runes. Our enemies may have taken her ancestral home and burned her belongings, but she isn’t forgotten.

“I am.”

“Good. Then let us begin. You and I will take on the evil that plagues this Continent.”

Xaden’s right. Some of the dragons know and they’re choosing to do something about it. Determination swells in my chest, and for the first time since Sloane was snatched away from me, I have a purpose beyond myself. Beyond protecting Xaden’s back while he stands in front of us all.

“I’m ready.” I nod.

“You’re not. But we will be.”

I mount and begin the next—and last—chapter of my life as Deigh’s rider.

Please note:

THE REST OF THE STORIES IN THIS COLLECTION CONTAIN SPOILERS FOR *Iron Flame*.



634 AU
Thoirt—Red Daggertail
(Female) Descended from the Wybjorian Line
Estimated Age: 62
Recorded Riders: 1

—The Compendium of Dragonkind,
last updated by Colonel Valin Kaori



Sloane

"Don't lose heart if it takes a few hours to bond," Kaori says, holding his hands behind his back as he addresses every first-year left standing after Gauntlet and Presentation.

I tune him out as he starts in on the finer points of patience.

Can’t lie. I thought the cliffside obstacle course was going to take me out. Then again, I was pretty sure I’d end up at the bottom of the ravine at Parapet, too. Oh, and I definitely saw my life flash before my eyes during a few challenges. Right. And then there was Presentation, where I also prepared for my imminent demise only to walk off the field unscathed.

Basically, I’ve been awaiting my death for the last three months, ever since Bodhi’s letter arrived with Garrick, telling me that my older brother had been killed. He wrote it carefully, knowing any mail between the marked ones is read and sometimes redacted, but I’d read through the lines. I know what happened to him, that Violet Sorrengail and Dain Aetos got him killed.

If my perfect, caring, incredible older brother—the best in his year—couldn’t even make it through twelve months in this place, then what chance do I possibly have? I’m so fucking over it, and I’m done pretending I want any part of this.

The riot flew overhead a few minutes ago, which means the forest is now full of opportunities to meet Malek. If the price for refusing to bond is incineration, then so be it.

I will not be made into an instrument of death.

“And remember to follow your instincts,” Kaori continues.

“Unless your instincts lead you to a really pissed-off red,” Baylor mutters from beside me, a playful grin lifting his rich-brown cheeks.

Farther right, a corner of Aaric’s mouth rises in the only display of emotion he’s had today. It’s as if he’s the one who feels like he’s destined to die here with how tense he’s been since breakfast.

Visia rocks side to side on my left. Clearly her nerves haven’t settled.

Can’t blame her. If a dragon scorched a path up my hairline last year and left me for dead, I wouldn’t exactly be chomping at the bit to get back into the forest.

“You’ll be all right,” Avalynn promises, wrapping her arm around Visia and resting her bright red curls on her shoulder.

Maybe she won’t. Maybe we’ll both die today. That’s what I want to say. Instead, I offer a reassuring smile and nod.

A third-year out of Second Wing jogs up to Kaori, then whispers

something in his ear before she retreats back into the woods.

"Right." Kaori clears his throat. "Looks like Molvic has been spotted in the forest."

A murmur goes through the cadets, and everyone around me perks up, so I do, too, feigning interest. It's a lot easier to simulate feelings than it is to explain to everyone why you don't actually have them anymore.

Well…I still have one. Rage is my constant, nagging companion. In that regard, maybe it *should* interest me that a vicious Blue Clubtail has entered the forest. Perhaps our temperaments would match. Except for the pesky little fact that I don't want to bond.

Definitely keeping that morsel of truth to myself.

"He isn't on this year's list," someone from Third Wing calls out.

"He isn't," Kaori responds, then sighs. "He never is. He just likes to wander about in the woods and get a look at you before inevitably returning to the Vale. Give him space and you'll be fine."

"A blue would be badass," Lynx says, rubbing his hands together.

"Sure, if you want to end up carbonized." Baylor shakes his head.

"You don't want that," Visia whispers. "Believe me."

Aaric's jaw ticks, but he stays silent, and Mischa continues to bite her nails to the quick behind him.

Kaori dismisses us, and we break apart, some staying to wish their squadmates well while others sprint headlong into the forest.

"Be careful." I hug Visia tightly.

"What if it goes like last year?" she asks in a whisper.

"It won't." I pull back and offer her a smile, making sure it reaches my eyes. I don't want my year-mate's last memory of me to be anything but supportive.

They all deserve the best.

"Look at Henrick," Avalynn says, hooking her arm around Visia's shoulder. The sun brings out the freckles across her nose. "He bonded on his repeat year, and you will, too."

"Okay, Second Squad," Baylor says, looking all of us in the eye. "Be smart. No one dies, got it? We hold last year's title of the Iron Squad, and we're not going to let Rhiannon down by losing it. It's ours again this year."

Yes, we should all rejoice if we're the squad who makes it past Threshing with the least amount of casualties. Because *that's* normal. Fuck, I hate it here.

Everyone agrees, and I give my best smile and nod to date. Damn, I'm getting good at faking it. We split off into the woods, and I find myself taking a parallel path to Aaric.

We keep a good fifteen feet between us as we head south, navigating the gigantic trees. This place has trees planted from every province in Navarre, and it would be spectacularly beautiful if it wasn't fertilized with the dust of dead cadets.

As death walks go, it's peaceful to hike near Aaric. He's not one to babble like Avalynn or fill the quiet with chatter because he's uncomfortable with silence like Lynx. He tends to keep to himself and only speaks when something needs to be said. I have no doubt he'll bond today. He's one of the best in our year, undefeated on the mat, even after someone broke his wrist last month. He has the kind of determination and purpose I admire, even envy.

But I desperately need him to go away so I can get down to the business of dying already.

"There she is."

My hand flies to my heart as Imogen jumps from a tree ten feet ahead of me.

"Trying to kill me from a heart attack?" I take a deep breath to steady my pulse and drop my hand.

"Feeling dramatic, are we?" She tucks her pink hair behind her ear and strides my way. "Because there are way scarier things trying to kill you out here." She glances toward Aaric. "Graycastle."

"Cardulo." Aaric nods, then glances between us, clearly picking up on Imogen's leave-us-alone energy. "I'm headed off." He starts to walk away, then turns back toward us. "No dying," he says, looking directly at me as if he can see straight past the layer of bullshit I slather myself in for everyone else. "No. Dying," he repeats.

One of his best attributes is also one of the most annoying. He's observant as hell.

"Yeah. All right." I give him a wave, and he lingers another heartbeat before striding off into the trees.

"What the fuck was that about?" Imogen's green eyes narrow on me.

"We want to keep the Iron Squad title." I shrug.

"Right." She quirks an eyebrow. "Are you fucking him?"

My mouth opens, then shuts, then opens again. "I'm sorry?" I manage to sputter.

"I don't personally care." She watches him disappear to the west. "Just curious, and I'm working on my friendship skills. You first-years are always a messy lot until you get your shit figured out."

I fold my arms. "And *you* have your shit figured out? Is there some magic button where you hit your third year and suddenly know everything?"

Out of everyone in the quadrant, she might be the one person who can understand the depth of my rage, the way it eats away at everything that could potentially bloom into something positive. She's definitely the only marked one I feel safe unleashing that rage on, because I know she won't run off and tattle to Riorson that I'm unstable and put yet another burden on his shoulders. But I can't be entirely honest with her, either.

I can't be entirely honest with anyone.

"Point made." A ghost of a smile crosses her face. "The thing about this place—this age—is that right when you think you've got an understanding of yourself and the people around you, everything shifts and you have to rise to a new set of challenges. We are perpetually works in progress, Little Mairi."

"Nice pep talk." I give her a thumbs-up and walk past her.

"Gods, you're a pain." She snorts and catches up with me easily. "Are you really trying to walk away from me?"

"This isn't a weeknight, Imogen." I glance sideways at her. "I'm not stuck training with you in the gym so I can *earn* one of the letters my brother left for me. Letters you know are rightfully mine." Anger simmers in my stomach. Doling them out once a week is a cruelty I can't accept. Reading his letters are the only times I feel like he's still here, like I could reach out and touch him if I tried hard enough. "I can't believe you're letting her use them as bait—"

"She's using them as a bribe," Imogen corrects me. "And

Sorrengail—while an acquired taste—has your best interests at heart. Would you actually show up to train if she hadn't dangled those letters above your pretty little blond head like a carrot?"

I grit my teeth.

"Exactly. But now you show up. You train. You might actually survive challenges thanks to Violet forcing you into the gym."

"Don't expect me to thank her." Fuck that.

"Oh, definitely not." Her voice drips with sarcasm as we step over a thick tree root. "After all, she only risked the anger of leadership and, oh, a *god* to save those letters for you. Did you ever think about that?"

My steps slow and my brows pucker because I really hadn't.

"Thought not." She sighs. "That girl nearly died, and the first thing she did when she got back to the quadrant wasn't to tell her friends she was alive, it was to break into your brother's room to save those letters we all know should be rightfully burned in sacrifice to Malek. Her first and foremost thought was for *you*."

"Did you trek all the way out here to continue your valiant defense of Violet Sorrengail?" My tone loses a little of its acid.

"No." Imogen shakes her head. "I came out to tell you that you're looking for a female Red Daggertail named Thoirt."

"What?" I trip over my own feet, and she grabs my elbow to keep me from face-planting in the dirt.

"Particular dragons who might be sympathetic to our cause tend to seek us out." She lets go of my arm, the same one that bears the identical rebellion relic to my brother's. "Thoirt is yours."

Thoirt. Something in my chest starts to ache, but I push it away.

I'm not bonding today. I'm not bonding *ever*.

"Good to know. Thanks." I try the nod and smile.

A cracking sound splits the air, and we both whip our attention to the east. Wood splits in the distance, followed by a shriek and a low *thud*. A second later, smoke rises above the canopy.

"Don't be scared," Imogen says. "That's not going to happen to you. Not with Thoirt already searching for you."

I blink and meet her gaze. "I'm not scared."

Her mouth curves into a smile. "You really aren't, are you?"

"No." I shake my head.

"Good. That will serve you well with a red. Their tempers require a rider who isn't as hotheaded as they are. Look, telling you about Thoirt isn't the only reason I'm here." She swallows, then reaches into the pocket of her uniform and draws out a tiny wooden figurine of a daggertail.

I take the offering and cradle it with both hands. It's perfect, from the snarling snout to the knife marks on the tail. I don't need to ask her who made it. My heart threatens to crack open and spill the messy contents I've worked so hard to keep locked away. "How do you have this?"

"He was carrying it when he died," she says softly. "I kept it for you. For this moment. So you'd see how much he loved Deigh. So you'd realize how much you're going to love Thoirt." Her next breath shakes. "Guess Sorrengail isn't the only cadet Malek might feel slighted by, but I couldn't burn it."

"Thank you." My fingers close around the figurine.

"You're welcome." She squeezes my folded hands. "Would you like me to stay with you?"

"No." I pull my hands from hers, then look her in the eye and lie with my whole heart. "I'll see you on the flight field."

"All right." She smiles. "But in all seriousness, are you fucking Graycastle? I find myself oddly curious, and as I feel like an honorary big sister, I've determined it's my right to ask."

"No." I scrunch my face in disgust. "He's hot, but he's like… another brother. All my squadmates are. Well, not to one another. Pretty sure I caught Baylor and Avalynn sneaking around last night."

"The night before Threshing? Absolutely." Her brow knits. "You did some sneaking around of your own, right? Everyone should get laid before Threshing. And after. Whenever possible around here, really. Never know when you'll wind up on the death roll."

I press my lips together because what the hell am I supposed to say to that?

"Oh gods." Her face falls. "You haven't been sneaking around? Enjoying all the freedom the first year gives you?"

"Is that what your sister recommended?" How are we even

having this conversation?

"Katrina died when I was fifteen, so we didn't really get to have these chats." She taps her chin. "But I definitely think she would recommend fully experiencing what life has to offer."

"Well…" I struggle for words. "I'd like this conversation to end—now."

"Fair." She retreats a few steps, then turns her back and walks away. "See you on the flight field. The world could use another Mairi in rider black," she calls back over her shoulder.

Except *this* Mairi doesn't want to be wearing rider black. I stand there for what feels like an eternity, staring at my brother's figurine. Screams echo in the distance. The breeze comes in with a hint of sulfur. Wings beat high above me as cadets bond.

Only when I have every detail of the figurine memorized do I tuck it into my pocket and begin walking.

Thoirt. Maybe knowing her name should change my mind about bonding, but it doesn't. I ignore the tugging sensation in my chest that tells me to head east and continue southward. She'll be far better off with someone who wants the power, who doesn't abhor the thought of wielding.

And in the next few hours, I'll finally be *free.*

I let the rage bubble back up as I walk for the better part of an hour, coming across a few frazzled cadets and one Brown Swordtail who doesn't bother to look my way.

Shit. There went a wasted chance.

An hour later, I step directly into the path of a Green Morningstartail. It stalks toward me, huffing steam through its nostrils, and I hold my position, chin raised, arms locked at my sides. My heart starts to pound as it comes closer, crushing leaves under its claws.

Twenty feet away. I look it straight in the eye.

Ten feet. I hold my breath and brace for collision.

Now.

It steps right over me, its talons striking the ground no more than a few feet behind where I stand.

What. The. Actual. Fuck.

The rage within me doesn't just simmer, it starts to sizzle.

By the time another hour passes, a Red Clubtail has blinked my way and continued on, and a pair of browns pick their way over me. I've seen countless dragons take to the sky through the holes of the canopy, heard their wingbeats as they bring their riders on their first flight. I bet there are only a few dozen of us left out here, and we're so scattered that I haven't seen another human in what feels like ages.

Gauging from the position of the sun, because gods know I didn't think to bring a pocket watch, I only have another two hours before Kaori scoops up all of us who haven't bonded and sets us back a year.

Fuck no. Absolutely not. I'm tired of living in limbo, and I won't do it for another year.

"Come on!" I scream up at the forest, the sky, at whoever might be listening. "I don't want to be here! I don't want *any* of it!" It's so freeing to finally voice the insidious thoughts that I can't stop once I start. "Take me already or let me go!"

I throw my arms out, exposing every vital organ in my body as I walk between towering redwoods that have seen more of this kingdom's history than I could ever stomach.

A giant Orange Swordtail swings its head in my direction, then pivots and moves straight for me, coming from about fifty yards away.

My stomach clenches. This is it. I know in the marrow of my bones that this creature brings my fate closer with every step.

"Yes, you!" I shout, holding out my arms. "Come on! I don't want to be a rider!"

The orange lowers its head and narrows its golden eyes as it approaches.

"Mairi!" a deep voice yells, tickling my brain with recognition, but I ignore it.

"I don't want your power!" My voice rises as I walk toward the orange, more than willing to meet my destiny halfway and uncaring if anyone sees. If it's a second- or third-year, they're bound by Codex not to interfere. "Fuck this place and these people. I'm not meant for

this!”

The orange unhinges its jaw, and its tongue curls.

“Mairi!” The voice grows louder. “Move!”

That’s exactly what I’m doing. I’m moving, extricating myself from a future where I’m nothing more than a sharpened blade used to harm other people.

Fire rolls up the back of the orange’s throat, then shoots forward, barreling toward me in a stream that will only take seconds to arrive.

I close my eyes and welcome the impending release.

Liam. Mom. Dad.

I’m hit in the side so hard, my feet leave the ground and I’m sent careening through the air. Arms band around me as heat rushes by, stinging my exposed skin, but the agony I sought doesn’t arrive. Instead, a different pain strikes my left shoulder, and my eyes pop open to see the world somersaulting as I’m hurtled along the forest floor, pulled tight against a rigid chest.

When we finally come to a stop, I look up into a beautiful pair of deep brown eyes, so bottomless I feel completely untethered. I could lose myself here entirely, stare for an eternity without exploring past the surface or noting every ribbon of amber that draws me in even further.

“What the fuck are you doing, Mairi?” His voice booms, vibrating through my own ribs.

Reality comes crashing back in with the speed of an arrow, and I recoil, but there’s no give in the arms that hold me suspended over the forest floor.

Dain Aetos hovers above me, one hand braced on the ground to my right, the other splayed across my back, as though he—

My eyes fly wide. He sheltered me from the worst of the impact. He knocked me out of the way. He’s holding me against his torso like I’m something he needs to protect.

But I know better.

“Get off me!” Anger courses through my veins, hotter than any fire a dragon could produce, and I shove both my hands against his immovable chest.

His eyes flare, and he moves with disconcerting speed,

untangling himself from my frame and jumping to his feet.

My back hits the ground, but I don't lie there longer than a heartbeat. I scramble to my feet as the tip of the orange's swordtail passes by.

"I'm going to ask you again. What the fuck are you doing?" he shouts, the tendons in his neck straining as his hands curl into fists at his sides. "Are you trying to die?"

"What business is it of yours?" I yell right back, disregarding every rule and regulation that's been thrown at me since Parapet. This asshole got my brother killed.

"I'm your fucking wingleader!" His hands fly upward like I'm the one who's out of line here. "I'm responsible for you!"

"Like you were Liam?" The rage gets the best of me, and I fly at him, throwing a fist up toward his face.

He retreats a step and I miss, causing me to nearly trip. "If you want to talk about your brother, it's not going to be while you're swinging at me."

"Fuck you!" I surge forward and swing again, despite the difference in our heights. "You got him killed!"

"Stop it!" He catches my fist, then traps the next one when I try my left hook.

"It's your fault they were sent to Athebyne!" Screw my hands; I still have feet. I kick out at him, and he grunts when I make contact with his shin. "I hate you!"

He yanks my hands and spins my body until my back is against his chest, and he holds my fists captive at my own collarbone. "Not as much as I hate myself, trust me."

"I don't," I seethe and debate headbutting him, but I'm an inch or so shy of his chin, so that maneuver isn't going to help me.

"For fuck's sake." He holds me even tighter, keeping me from moving. "If you want to hit me, ask for a challenge, but I've seen you fight, and it's not going to end well for you."

"Let. Me. Go." I bite out each word through gritted teeth.

To my complete and utter surprise, he does.

I stumble forward, then pivot toward him so I don't give him my back. Not that he couldn't have just killed me outright if he'd wanted

to. My chest heaves with exertion, but he just stands there, covered in dirt from our tumble but otherwise completely unfazed. He didn't even break a sweat, which feels horrifically unfair.

"Are you done hitting me?" he asks, lifting his brows.

"I haven't decided." I roll my left shoulder as it starts to ache. A quick glance tells me I hit something, because there's a tear in my uniform and that's definitely blood wetting the fabric.

"I appreciate the candor." He stares down at me, emotions flickering across his features too fast for me to get a read on what he feels. "Yes. Violet made it abundantly clear that I am the reason your brother was sent to Athebyne, and I live with that every fucking day. What I won't live with is you throwing your life away in the middle of Threshing, screaming at a *dragon* that you don't want to be a rider."

"And that's why you just broke Codex?" I hurl the accusation like a punch, and given the way his eyes widen, it hits. "Yeah. You *interfered*."

"Fuck." He laces his fingers, then rests them on the top of his head and closes his eyes. A deep breath later, he looks at me again. "At least I have your life to show for it."

My stomach lurches and I drop my gaze, realizing how close I came to that not being true. I just hurled myself toward a *dragon*.

"Are you all right?" he asks.

I study the root structure of the tree to my left.

"Look at me," he orders.

I want the ground to open up and swallow me whole. Dain Aetos just not only saw me hit my lowest point but saved me from myself. Somehow, it only makes me hate him more.

"Eyes here, Mairi!" he snaps.

My gaze flies to his.

"Feel free to hate me," he says, his voice softening. "We never have to speak of this again. You can pretend none of this happened if it makes you feel better, but I can't leave you out here if you're going to pull a repeat performance of whatever that was. So for the last time, are you all right?"

"No, I'm not all right," I answer truthfully for the first time, letting

my anger leech into the words. "It's not all right that I had no time to mourn my brother before I was forced to cross the parapet. It's not all right that I got thrown into a squad with one of the people responsible for his death, then put under the command of the other. It's not all right that I'm here and he isn't. It's not all right that I want nothing to do with wielding, or power, or becoming one of the perfect little weapons this place prides itself on churning out. It's not all right that I wasn't given a godsdamn choice like you were for the simple reason that my parents lost their war and your dad won his."

He flinches.

Wingbeats sound above us, and we both look up as a Red Daggertail swoops from the sky.

Thoirt. My heart jolts, and I feel a click deep within my soul, as if something slipped into the broken place and sealed a leaking crack, making life just a fraction more bearable.

She lands in the space where the orange almost took my life, and the ground shudders beneath my feet. Her head swivels toward us, and she growls in Aetos's direction. She's strawberry red, with glistening scales, formidable claws, and might just be the most beautiful dragon I've ever seen.

"Guessing this one is yours," Dain says, putting up his hands and looking at me instead of her. "Can I trust that you won't try to get yourself killed?"

"Yes."

"Good." He retreats from Thoirt, then turns to walk away once he's out of her line of sight. "Looks like I need to go report myself for a breach of Codex."

I can't find it in my heart to pity him. Not when he's living while Liam lies buried in Tyrrendor.

"You lost your brother at Resson." Her voice is sweeter than I imagined a dragon having.

"I did." I turn to face her fully.

"As did I." She lowers her head, but it doesn't feel threatening. *"The dragons of my line have long chosen the riders of yours."*

My lips part. She's a Red Daggertail, just like Deigh was, and she looks remarkably similar to Liam's figurine. "You're Deigh's sister?"

"I am, and just as he chose Liam, I choose you, Sloane Mairi."

All the fight drains out of me, and without the rage, the anger, I'm left with only the grief, and gods does it feel impassable. The weight of it is too much, too sharp to carry without bleeding out.

"Perhaps by bonding, we will help each other carry that weight. Help each other to heal." She studies me without judgment, contradicting everything I've been taught about her kind.

"I've lost everyone," I whisper, and my throat tries to close. "My parents. My brother. I'm the last living Mairi. How do you heal from that?" If she has the answer, I desperately need it. My eyes prickle.

"Time." She inches her snout closer. *"As the last living Mairi, the daughter of the Rune Master, you must choose to live on."*

"Because my mom was good at runes?" I shrug, but I move toward her. "I don't want—"

"Power. I know." She comes within reach of me, then rests her head on the ground. *"I have felt every loss you have suffered. I have seen all you have endured and know what it will cost you to conquer what you feel is insurmountable. But you must endure."*

"What good am I to you as a rider if I don't want to wield?"

"Now." She eases forward, and I lift my hand to the warm scales between her nostrils. *"You don't want to wield* now*. I will give you what you have so deeply needed—choice. Only when you're ready will I channel to you."*

"And if I choose never to?" My breath shudders.

"Then we will be excellent companions," she says gently. *"But I have seen your heart, and I know you will rise from this darkness. You will wield when you are ready, because if you do not, this war will be lost."*

I shake my head. "You're thinking of Liam. He was the warrior."

"I am thinking of you. Your brother did not inherit your mother's gift. You did."

"I don't understand."

"Not yet, but you will." She pushes against my hand. *"For now, you will heal. You will grow. You will learn. And I promise that while you are the last of your line in this moment, you will never be alone again. You will never see a sunrise where I am not waiting for you."*

I lean forward and rest my forehead against her scales, taking in the enormity of what she's vowed, of what bonding her really means. I'll have family again.

For the first time in months, my smile doesn't just reach my eyes, I feel it in every beat of my heart.

"Would you like to fly back to your friends?"

My squadmates.

I lift my head and grin, then nod. "Yes."

When I settle into her seat and adjust my hold on her pommel, it feels like walking through the gates of Mairghdelle.

I'm home.



634 AU
Molvic—Blue Clubtail
(Male) Descended from the Gormfaileas Line
Estimated Age: 39
Recorded Riders: 0

—The Compendium of Dragonkind,
last updated by Colonel Valin Kaori



Aaric

The last three times a prince of Navarre walked these woods, he didn't come out alive.

Now that the sky is turning colors with the approaching sunset, I'm starting to wonder if I'll not only break that trend but become

the first cadet of royal blood to be forced to repeat as an unbonded. Since I'm already the first cadet of royal blood to enter the quadrant under a fake name to hide his location from his father, I'm content with breaking precedent.

Fine. If my dragon isn't ready to bond me this year, I'll wait until next.

Playing the long game requires patience.

Steam billows from my left, and my heart leaps as I whip my head in that direction, only to sigh with disappointment when I spot a Green Daggertail stalking toward me.

"No." I shake my head once, locking eyes with the glaring dragon, and then continue on my way.

I've abandoned everything—my title, my family, my very name—to be here. What's another year of my life? It's certainly a better option than death.

We were given no answers, no explanation when my brother died here three years ago. Dragons don't answer to the inquiries of kings. One day Alic was a first-year cadet, and the next his belongings were hauled out of his bedroom in Calldyr to be burned for Malek.

I'm under no illusions about the kind of person Alic grew into. In a family of three brothers, he was the cruelest, the most given to violent tantrums, the one who taught me to mask every weakness because if I didn't, he'd exploit it. He didn't start that way, but I barely recognized him the last few years of his life and choose to mourn the version of him I remember from childhood.

Though I'm not sure that version of him could have survived this place, either.

But I will.

Others are in here hoping for acceptance or praying to gods who never bother to answer.

I'm hunting.

In the five hours I've spent scouring these woods, I've come across reds, oranges, browns, and greens, none of which spoke to me, obviously. But I'm not looking for them anyway.

Not when Molvic is here.

"Come on out and play," I whisper into the wind as I pass

another ancient redwood.

The moment Kaori said the Blue Clubtail had entered the valley, an irrefutable ache started to pang in my chest. That same ache has only grown more painful the closer I get to the southern edge of the forest, and when I approach a small clearing, it outright screams.

The field is empty when I walk into the knee-high grass, but I feel him.

"I know you're here." My gaze scans the tree line, and the ache behind my ribs evaporates when I find two golden eyes staring back, nearly hidden in the trees. "Molvic."

He surges into the clearing, sun glistening on his sapphire-blue scales, baring his teeth with a low growl. My pulse jolts, but I steady it with a breath and sheer force of will. Among blues, he's second in ferocity only to Sgaeyl, which means showing any fear is going to get me cooked.

"You're mine." I take a measured step toward him.

He roars, flattening the grass between us and vibrating every bone in my body.

Godsdamn. I speak nine languages, about four of them fluently, and though none of them is dragon, the vehemence of his denial is easily translated.

"Fine, you can say I'm yours if that makes you feel better." It takes every ounce of concentration I have to keep my muscles from locking as I walk forward. He'll set me on fire or he'll bond me, but one way or another, he's about to change my life.

His tongue curls, and the back of his throat turns orange.

Well. Fuck.

I sprint toward the right, then dive over a decayed log and roll as heat envelops my spine. When I look back, the grass is smoking where I stood. I dust off my hands, smearing a bloody scrape along my palm. That was a little closer than I would have liked.

His head swings toward me, and his glare becomes downright hostile.

"You. Are. Mine." I gain my feet and take a symbolic step in his direction, so he knows that I intend to see this through. "You may kill me in this field, but it will not change that fact."

"I was drawn to the strength of your bloodline once before and found myself sorely disappointed," he says, his voice low and coarse.

Alic. It has to be. My ribs tighten.

"I am not my brother." I inch forward.

"That is why I still allow you to breathe, Camlaen Aaric Baran." He darts his head forward and bathes me in steam.

"It's Aaric," I correct him. "Did you kill him?" Another step puts us barely ten feet apart.

"No." He growls again but keeps his teeth closed.

My fingers start to curl, but I hold back from asking if he knows who did, if he saw my brother in the final hours before his demise. We will have a lifetime for those conversations, if I can just live through the next few minutes.

"I am not Alic. I am not Halden. I am not my father." My voice rises with conviction.

"I know who you are. Do you think you're so different just because your mother saw to your tutelage?" he snarls.

"Yes." I move forward. "I was neither heir nor spare, and therefore overlooked by my father for what turned out to be my own benefit. My mother taught me that power, when given without restriction, leads to a corrosion of morals from which there is no recovery. That will not be my fate. I intend to *earn* my power. I will earn *you*."

His head rises a few feet, but not enough to bare his throat.

"Do you know war rages beyond the wards?"

Another growl rumbles in his throat. *"I do."*

I nod. "You've seen every memory I have, so you know how I feel about it. You know my thoughts even now." I hold out my arms, palms skyward. "I am the one you have waited for, searched for all these years. I am the reason you have wandered the Threshing Valley unbonded. My brother may have left you disillusioned with my bloodline, but I will not."

He bares his teeth. *"And you think you know the future?"*

"I know *mine*." I nod with certainty. "I will fight in that war, perhaps even die. But I will not stand idly by as my family watches the destruction from a gilded tower, false stewards to a population

they've intentionally kept ignorant."

"And where will that leave your monarchy?" He prowls forward and tilts his head down, holding my gaze. I focus on one of his eyes, noting my reflection in the golden orb. Gone are the royal robes, the fine silks and tunics. I stand before Molvic in rider black with no title or rank besides the year mark on my collar.

"I don't give a fuck." My heart starts to pound. No matter my thoughts, I've never spoken them aloud, never given them a voice. I straighten my back. "My mother and all her good intentions are dead. If you bond me, I will fly for the name on my uniform, not the one I was given at birth. I will fly for your kind, but not the Empyrean that has enabled this travesty. Kill me now for sedition or bond me. Your choice. Mine is already made."

He growls again, and I wonder if I've gone too far, but there can be only honesty between us. He must know I will follow my thoughts, my plans, through to execution.

Even if it leads to my own.

"And I will promise you, I will die before I stand on the side of complicity." I take a steadying breath. "You must know: I intend to tear this kingdom apart."

His eye flares. *"I accept your terms, Aaric Graycastle."*

No one in my family even knows I'm missing yet.

But I'm coming for them all.



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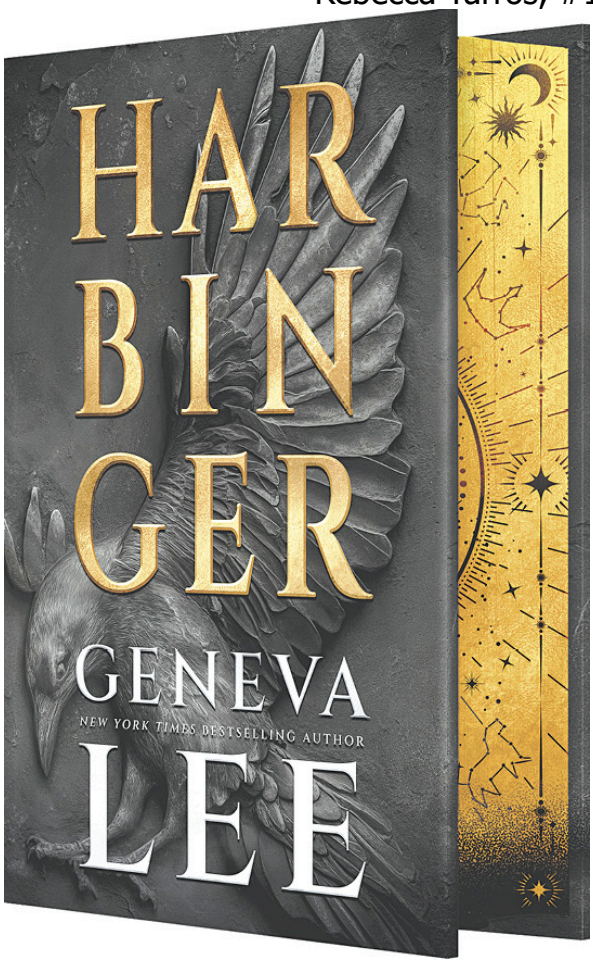
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Rebecca Yarros is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of over twenty novels including *Fourth Wing* and *In the Likely Event*. She's the recipient of the British Book Award for Book of the Year and the Alex Award from the American Library Association. She loves military heroes and has been blissfully married to hers for over twenty years. As a mother of six, when she's not writing, you can find her at the hockey rink or sneaking in some guitar time.

Having fostered then adopted their youngest, Rebecca is passionate about helping children in the foster system through her nonprofit, One October, which she cofounded with her husband in 2019.

www.RebeccaYarros.com

Romance, banter, and all the yearning? I'm obsessed.
—Rebecca Yarros, #1 *NYT* bestselling author



Bishop's hood is drawn, obscuring his face even more in the dim room. I take a step in his direction like he holds some invisible thread that I can't resist pulling. He tilts his head, and the hood shifts just enough to see one corner of his mouth curve slightly, like he knows I'm walking toward him and no one else.

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Cover of Threshing Day by Rebecca Yarros